"OPENED IT WITH AN EXPRESSION OF NERVOUS ANXIETY."

[*Frontispiece.*

CHINESE STORIES

BY

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With Illustrations

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INTRODUCTION.

CHINESE FICTION.

A RECENT writer has pointed out that, in one respect, the Chinese are much in the condition of a character in one of Richter's novels, who assumed that the first meridian lay through his own skull. Everything which belongs to them forms part of the centre of the universe, and all that is beyond their immediate cognisance is foreign and *négligeable*. The same principle holds good in the matter of literary taste. It is laid down, as a law of the Medes and Persians, that the canonical books and the works related to them contain all the wisdom that it is good for man to know, and all the interest and amusement which a rational being should require. It is of no use to attempt to explain to a be-spectacled and self-important scholar that the efforts of the imagination are as much worthy of study as the solemn dicta of Confucius and the aphorisms of

Mencius. Pity and contempt are the only feelings which such an attempt to swim against the current would arouse. Years of careful training will make a tree whose shoots should spring heavenwards bend the points of its branches towards the earth. Centuries of constraint have had a parallel effect on the Chinese. If ever they possessed a desire to soar into the higher atmosphere of imagination, their efforts have been thwarted, and their aspirations have been forced downwards to the solid groundwork of prosaic literature. By this careful and persistent training they have learned to believe that to pass from the contemplation of the classical and historical literature to that of the lighter efforts of more subtle authors, is to descend from Parnassus into the gutter. This is, however, a pious opinion in which there is no reason that we should concur. The standard of taste in Peking is happily not necessarily the same as in London, and we may be forgiven if, in this instance, we dissent from the orthodox view. In the classical literature we have reflected, it is true, the serious bent of the people's mind, but it fails to reproduce the fancy and personal *esprit* which are brought out in their romances and plays. On all such works the Chinese pour out the vials of their contempt. *Siao hwa*, or "small-talk," is the only term they can find to express their opinion of them, and they profess to relegate them to the apartments of the women and the homes of the uneducated.

Fortunately, however, the learned Chinese are not quite such literary prigs as they pretend to be; and just as the most pronounced Confucianist keeps a

soft place in his heart for Buddhist deities and the mysticisms of Tao, so the most pedantic scholar occasionally indulges, under the rose, in the study of the loves and adventures of heroes and heroines who are mere fictions of the brain. It is difficult to say when the first story was published in China, but it is quite safe to assume that stories have been current from all time. There never was a land in which stories did not exist. Even the dull nomads of the deserts of Mongolia and of the still drearier wastes of Tibet attempt to vary the monotony of their existence by telling weird tales as they crowd round their camp-fires. To such people the efforts of the imagination are to life what froth is to champagne. They keep it fresh and brisk, and impart liveliness to what without them would be flat and wearisome.

The earliest stories which we know of in China are those which are enshrined in the 'Book of Odes,' the contents of which date back to the time of Solomon. In these ballads we find tales and fragments of tales which doubtless formed part of the stock-in-trade of professional story-tellers who sought to amuse the Chinese immigrants on their arrival in the strange land of their adoption. In these, as in everything Chinese, there is a lack of that vivid fancy which belongs to more imaginative races. The fiery inspiration of the Aryan peoples has been denied to the Scythian mind. No torrents of passion nor eloquent denunciations break the calm narratives which flow from the placid pens of Chinese story-tellers. Their themes are for the most part the idyllic scenes of country life, in which love, tempered with subdued

passion, plays a prominent part. On such matters they only speak right on, and give us plain and detailed particulars of the events which they wish to describe. Compared with Western writers, they labour under the disadvantage of having to work out their own literary systems. No ideas from the people of other countries, except those of India, have ever reached them, and all opportunities of sharpening their wits by communication with other foreigners have been denied them. To India they owe much that gives lightness and variety to their works of fiction. Buddhistic fancies and the philosophical conceptions which underlie Brahmanism introduced new and interesting phases into the native literature; and indirectly those supernatural and magical ideas which first made their appearance in the writings of Taoist sages, and which have since become part of the stock-in-trade of Chinese novelists, were derived from the same sources.

Chinese novels may be divided into two classes, historical and social. Chinese history, as all students of the subject know, has through all its long course been broken up into short lengths by rebellions, wars, and dynastic changes, and thus furnishes abundant matter for novels of the first of these kinds. It has also this great advantage in the eyes of native novelists, that it supplies them with plots ready-made. All that is required of them is that they should dispose the characters and events in picturesque arrangements, and introduce the leaven of dialogue, and any touches of fancy they may be capable of, to give lightness and variety to their

pages. The most celebrated Chinese historical novel is the *San kwo chi*, or 'History of the Three Kingdoms,' by one Lo Kwanchung, a writer of the Yuen dynasty (1268-1368). The period chosen as the subject of this work is that which embraces the fall of the Han dynasty (A.D. 25-220) and the existence of the three states into which the empire was temporarily divided during the succeeding fifty-five years. This epoch was one of great disorder. There were wars and rumours of wars on all sides. The reins of power had fallen from the nerveless grasp of the degenerate rulers of the Han dynasty and had been seized by a usurper named Tung Cho, who put the reigning emperor to death and placed a puppet of his own on the throne. The violence and atrocities of this man have made him a proverb and a byword in Chinese history. One particular act attributed to him has been singled out as being even more atrocious than his many butcheries and murders. With remorseless cruelty he enforced the removal of the population of the imperial capital, Lohyang, numbering, it is said, several millions, to the city of Ch'anyang, and ordered the destruction by fire of the deserted town. At length Fate overtook him—as it commonly overtakes tyrants—and he was assassinated by one of the countless enemies which he had raised up against himself. His fall, however, failed to bring about peace, and rebel after rebel rose to keep alive the prevailing disorder. The puppet whom Tung Cho had placed on the throne was murdered in his turn, and a successful leader, assuming the imperial purple, proclaimed himself the first

of the emperors of the Wei dynasty. Simultaneously with this new line of sovereigns another usurper established a kingdom for himself in the modern province of Szech'uen; and yet another founded one, which he styled the kingdom of Wu, in Southern China. The rivalries of these three states made a very pretty quarrel, and probably no half-century in Chinese history has so bloody a record as that of this epoch. It is therefore a model period for the pen of a historical novelist, and Lo Kwanchung has taken every advantage of the materials thus placed at his disposal. With considerable skill he unfolds the complicated drama, and moves the puppets, crowded on the stage, with precision and without confusion. The principal characters stand prominently forward, and the action of the plot goes on about them without in the least obscuring their presence. Nor is the romance ever allowed to drop to the prosaic level of history. The more serious records of wars and political movements are lightened by a plentiful introduction of artistic by-play. By the exercise of the novelist's licence we are admitted into the palaces of the emperors, and are initiated into the secrets of court intrigues. Even the imperial harems are thrown open for our benefit, and we are made confidants of the plots hatched in the busy brains of idle ladies, which on more than one occasion overthrew emperors and caused fire and sword to overspread the land. The supernatural also is largely introduced. Times of political disorder are generally favourable to superstition, and it is quite possible that Lo may have only given a picturesque colouring

to the reported wonders and strange omens which were commonly current at the time.

The 'History of the Three Kingdoms' is unquestionably the best Chinese novel of its class. There are others—the *Shui hu ch'uen*, for instance—but by common consent the one above described has received the general suffrages of the people.

The social novel is of quite a different kind. Like the Babylonians of old, Chinamen look upon war as an uncultured accomplishment, and the writers of romances of this order eschew battles and bloodshed with a horror equal to the avidity with which some Western novelists indulge in them. With us, as with all Aryan nations, a gallant soldier is the popular hero, and the atmosphere of the camp is a favourite scene for the plot. But with the Chinese this is not so. Military prowess does not attract the applause of the people. In their eyes a man is a model hero who takes the highest degree at the examinations, and quotes the classics with the greatest fluency. It is true that he should be a Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche;* that he should with the strength of his right arm vanquish all those who oppose him, and should even dare to brave the anger of the emperor and his ministers in the cause of right. But he must not be a soldier by profession. That would degrade him at once in the eyes of all the cultured classes, and reduce the heroine, whom he always marries in the last chapter amid the plaudits of the court and the people, to a very common level. In addition to these eminent qualities, he must be clothed with virtue as with a garment. He must

cast behind him every temptation to evil, and however difficult may be the circumstances with which he is surrounded, he must invariably act in strict accordance with the "rules of propriety." He should venture all in the cause of oppressed virtue, and esteem it the highest honour to have exposed the wrong-doer.

A typical novel of this kind is the *Hao ch'iu ch'uen*, which was translated by Sir John Davis under the title of 'The Fortunate Union.' There the hero acts up to the letter of the description just given. His name is *Tieh* or "Iron," and his conduct is as inflexible as that metal.

There is plenty of movement in the plot, but the scenes are placed before the reader as a succession of tableaux; and though the action of the principal characters is sufficient to describe them in a general way, there is no close analysis of motive, and no gradations in their good and evil qualities. They are all either very black or very white. Half-tones are unknown to Chinese novelists, and the reader has to apply his knowledge of nature to the events recorded to complete the novel. It is, however, unquestionably interesting, as being descriptive of certain and curious phases of Chinese life, and as accurately reflecting the sentiments of the people under many and varying circumstances.

One fault which is observable in all Chinese novels is the want of conciseness in the style in which they are written. The same leisurely manner which marks every movement of a Chinaman distinguishes the way in which his romances are composed. Neither

the readers nor the authors are in a hurry, and therefore the former are ready to accept and the latter to provide a prolixity and minuteness of detail which would be the ruin of any work of the kind published in Europe. This is a vice inherent in all Eastern works, from the 'Arabian Nights' downwards, and Orientals will have to become unorientalised before any reform in this direction can be expected. To a great extent the shorter tales of the Chinese are free from this defect in style. The authors who have to complete their plots within a given number of pages, have not space in which to indulge the prolix meanderings of their more elaborate brethren of the pen, and consequently their pages are free from this fault of larger works. All Easterns are fond of stories, and there is scarcely a country east of or about the Nile in which the professional story-teller is not a familiar figure. Whether in the bazaars in Egypt, under the village trees in India, or in the temples in Burma, crowds are constantly to be found listening to the tales of wandering narrators whose guerdons of reward vary in accordance with their power to amuse their audiences. In China, where printing is so cheap and where the knowledge of letters is so general, the book-shops cater to the taste, which is as pronounced there as elsewhere; and of an evening, when the day's work is done, a favourite amusement of the people is to listen to the tales from the *Liao chai chi i*, the *Chin ku ch'i kwan*, or some other well-known collection, read by the better educated among them. The stories in the *Chin ku ch'i kwan* are the best of their kind. They

are more carefully edited, and free from the crude marvels which Chinese authors are so fond of introducing into their works of imagination. The critical faculty is not largely developed among the Chinese. However much a statement may be surpassing belief, they have no difficulty in accepting it. Nor does the fact that it clashes with opposing assertions or with ascertained facts disturb them for a moment. Their mode of procedure is simple; they accept both, and never trouble themselves to reconcile the conflicting statements. This credulousness relieves writers from the necessity of being consistent, and allows them to wander in the realms of the marvellous to their hearts' content. To the mind of the more matter-of-fact and logical European this flighty imagination is sometimes carried to excess, and supernatural wonders which arrest the attention and excite the interest of native audiences serve only to weary him. Ghosts and magical appearances are favourite properties with Chinese authors, and are often brought in with telling effect, as, for instance, in the story of the 'Fickle Widow.'[1]

Another typical specimen of the contents of the collection from which the above is taken is a story entitled 'A Girl Graduate,' which will be found related in the following pages.

In times gone by Chinese historians were officially divided into historians of the left hand and historians of the right hand, the former being charged with the duty of recording at length imperial charges, ministerial speeches, &c., and the latter with that of nar-

[1] See p. 249 *et seq.*

rating bare facts. A division somewhat of this kind is observable in the collections of stories. We have on the one hand full and lengthy—sometimes too full and lengthy — tales, and on the other good short stories something after the manner of Dean Ramsay's 'Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character.' Many of these are of too oriental a character to be translatable, and others turn on such minute points of orthography and diction that they are difficult of explanation. Some, however, are thoroughly good and amusing, as, for instance, the story of a wine-bibber who dreamed one night that a friend had sent him a flask of excellent Suchow wine. Without loss of a moment he put it on the fire to heat (Chinese always drink their wine hot), but before it was ready he awoke. Overcome with regret at the loss of the treat which his imagination had conjured up, he exclaimed, "How I wish I had drunk it cold!" This is almost identical with the Irish story of the man who dreamed that while hobnobbing with the Pope, the Holy Father invited him to drink a glass of grog. While the water was boiling, the same calamity overtook Pat as discomfited the Chinaman, and was productive of the same wish.

Unless a number of these stories are base misrepresentations, Chinese wives, down-trodden as they are in theory, manage to assert themselves in a most unmistakable manner. Henpecked husbands are the common butts of these story-tellers, who are never tired of representing the superior sex in most inferior positions. For example: A certain official underling one day drew upon himself the wrath of his

wife, who scratched his face so severely that when he presented himself before his chief the next morning, that officer asked him the cause of his wounds. With ready wit the underling replied, "While taking my ease in my garden last evening a portion of the vine-trellis fell on me and scratched my face." The officer, who knew something of his domestic relations, at once divined the true cause, "Don't talk nonsense," he replied; "it was your wife who scratched you. Send a policeman to bring her before me." As it happened, his own wife had been listening to this interview behind the door, and in defence of her sex burst in upon the scene. The officer, terrified by this invasion, said hurriedly to the underling, "Go away, never mind your wife; *my* vine-trellis is about to fall on me."

Female curiosity is another fruitful subject of these anecdotes, and one is told in which this failing brought to a close a life almost as long as Noah's. According to Chinese tradition the king of Hades keeps a register of the lives of men. To each person is given a single page, and so soon as that is filled up, the person whose career it represents is at once called to appear before the dread sovereign. It chanced, however, that on one occasion the king, observing that the binding of his book required mending, tore out a leaf from the volume with which to repair the back. The man to whose career this leaf was appropriated was thus overlooked, and the page not being filled up, he went on living until he reached the age of nine hundred and sixty-two, when he had occasion to mourn the death of his seventy-second wife. This

lady, being of an inquisitive turn of mind, had often been puzzled by the length of her husband's career, and on appearing in her turn before the king of Hades, she made bold to ask him for an explanation of such unusual longevity. The king at once ordered an investigation to be made, and the mistake being discovered, he filled up the page at once, and Chang's matrimonial ventures were incontinently cut short.

Like many of the religious and philosophical ideas of the Chinese, the drama was first introduced from India, whence, in the sixth century, a band of travelling gymnasts, dressed in the skins of wild animals, initiated the people into the pleasures of pantomimic performances. For several centuries the art made little progress, and it was not until the latter end of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) that the wild dances and songs of the pantomimists were arranged in regular plays. Even then the playwright's profession seems to have been languidly practised, and it required the infusion of Mongol blood to make the Chinese seriously take to dramatic performances. During the dynasty founded by Jenghiz Khan, a liberal patronage was extended to the drama, and under this generous influence were produced plays which are universally recognised as the best specimens of Chinese dramatic writing. At the present day the taste for the stage is general and absorbing. On most great official and religious functions theatrical displays bear a part, as well as on all occasions of social festivity. Permanent theatres are to be found in most towns and large villages; and where none exists, a mat building is readily extemporised on the

appearance of a strolling band of actors. Where, however, even the erection of such a makeshift is inconvenient, the village temple is turned for the nonce into a Thespian theatre. The very simple stage arrangements required make the adaptation of this or any other building an easy matter. Stage scenery is unknown, and all that the actors require is a dressing-room from which they can enter on the stage, and to which they can retreat from it. Custom forbids, as a rule, the appearance of more than two interlocutors at once on the stage, and this, coupled with the absence of scenery, compels each actor as he presents himself to describe in a monologue who he is, and the circumstances under which he appears. These explanations mar to a certain extent the literary effect of a Chinese play; but with the exception of this fault of manner, the best Chinese dramas are good specimens of the playwright's art. The subjects chosen for the plots are much the same as those in vogue in other countries. Historical events are very commonly selected as topics for the legitimate drama; while the materials for tragedies, comedies, and farces are found in the events of daily life.

One of the best known historical plays is the *Han Kung Ch'ou*, which was translated by Sir John Davis under the title of the "Sorrows of Han." The scene is laid in the first century before Christ, and describes with not more than the usual poetic licence events which actually occurred. The play opens with the appearance of the Tartar khan, who, after the usual manner, describes himself in these words:—

"I am Han Chenyu, the old inhabitant of the sandy wastes, the sole ruler of the northern regions. The wild chase is our trade; battle and conquests our chief occupation. The Emperor Wênwang retired before our eastern tribes; the state of Wei trembled at us, and sued for our friendship. The ancient title of our chief has in the course of time been changed to that I now bear. When the two races of Tsin and Han contended in battle, and filled the empire with tumult, our tribes were in full power. . . . For seven days my ancestor hemmed in with his forces the Emperor Kaoti, until by the contrivance of a minister a treaty was concluded and the princesses of China were yielded in marriage to our khans. Since the time of Hwuiti and the Empress Lü How each successive generation has adhered to the established rule, and sought our alliance with its daughters. In the reign of the late Emperor Suenti my brother contended with myself for the rule of our nation, and its power was weakened until the tribes elected me as their chief. I am a real descendant of the empire of Han. I command a hundred thousand armed warriors. We have moved to the south, and have approached the border, claiming an alliance with the imperial race. Yesterday I despatched an envoy with tributary presents to demand a princess in alliance, but know not if the emperor will satisfy the engagement with the customary oaths. The fineness of the season has drawn away our chiefs on a hunting excursion amidst the sandy steppes. May they meet with success, for we Tartars have no fields, our bows and arrows are our sole means of subsistence."

At this point the khan exits, and is succeeded by the Chinese minister Mao, who proceeds to hold up a mirror to his character which reflects his aims and motives in the most odious light. He does not scruple to confess to the employment of the meanest of sycophantic arts to keep the favour of his sovereign, and of the vilest injustice in order to

plunder the people. Having made this frank avowal, he is joined by the emperor, who, having explained his existence to the audience, proceeds to consult his minister as to the internal affairs of the palace. Prompted by evil design, Mao suggests to his sovereign that he should seek to fill up his harem in accordance with the liberal examples set by the more rollicking of his predecessors. With little reluctance the emperor accepted the proffered advice, and forthwith appointed Mao to select ninety-five of the most beautiful girls in the country for his inspection. Armed with the imperial command, Mao travelled through the provinces, making choice of all the pretty girls whose parents are willing to pay him a good round sum for the honour of having their daughters placed among the favoured beauties. In the course of his travels he discovered at Ch'êngtu, in Szech'uen, a girl of such surpassing loveliness that his first impulse was to write her down at once as one of the selected fair ones; but on his intimating to her father that he should require a bribe in return for the service, he was frankly told by the hardy westerner that he was quite unable, even if he were willing, to offer such a lordly gift. On receiving this rebuff Mao's first inclination was to strike Chao Chün's name off his list, but the evil nature of the man prompted a more subtle revenge. He directed her to appear at the palace with the rest, and as was his practice in all such cases, he carried her portrait back with him to the capital. There he employed an artist to make a copy of the picture, in which, while preserving some of the beauty of the original, the

painter was so to mar the general effect as to ensure the relegation of the lady to the "Cold Palace" for the rest of her life.

At first the plan succeeded admirably. Poor Chao Chün was not even sent for to be looked at, and consoled herself as best she might by singing to her lute. It so happened, however, that one evening when the emperor was strolling through his palace he approached her room and heard her singing. Being struck by the richness of her voice, he sent to summon her to his presence. The sight of her exquisite beauty filled him with astonishment, and when he heard from her lips the infamous conduct of Mao, he in righteous anger ordered his execution. By chance the minister got wind of the evil that was intended against him, and fled precipitately from the capital, taking with him the true portrait of the lady Chao. At this time the Tartar khan above introduced was threatening the northern frontier of the empire, and Mao, filled with schemes of revenge, betook himself to the Mongol camp.

"A long journey," he says, "has brought me to this spot, and from the troops of men and horses, I conclude I have reached the Tartar camp. Leader (*to a soldier*), inform King Han Chenyu that a great minister of the empire of Han is come to wait on him.

"KHAN (*on being informed*). Command him to approach. (*Seeing* MAO.) What person are you?

"MAO. I am a minister of Han. In the western palace of the emperor is a lady named Chao Chün, of rare and surpassing charms. When your envoy, great king, came to demand a princess, this lady would have answered the summons; but the emperor of Han could not bring himself to part with

her, and refused to yield her up. I repeatedly renewed my bitter reproaches, and asked how he could bear for the sake of a woman's beauty to implicate the welfare of two nations. For this the emperor would have beheaded me; and I therefore escaped with the portrait of the lady, which I present, great king, to yourself. Should you send away an envoy with the picture to demand her, she must certainly be delivered up. Here is the portrait."

The khan adopts the advice, and sends an envoy to the emperor demanding the lady Chao as the only price at which he might purchase peace. The envoy arrives just when the emperor is at the full tide of his affection for the lady, and the subject of his mission brings despair to the imperial lover's heart.

"The Emperor. Let our civil and military officers consult and report to me the best mode of causing the foreign troops to retire without yielding up the princess to propitiate him. . . . It would seem that for the future, instead of men for ministers, we need only have fair women to keep our empire in peace.

"The Lady Chao. In return for your majesty's bounties, it is your handmaid's duty to brave death to serve you. I can cheerfully enter into this foreign alliance for the sake of producing peace, and shall leave behind me a name ever green in history. But my love for your majesty, how can I lay that aside?

"Emperor. Alas, I know too well that I can do that no more than yourself!

"President. I entreat your majesty to sacrifice your love, and think of the security of your dynasty. Hasten, sir, to send the princess on her way.

"Emperor. Let her this day advance a stage on her journey and be presented to the envoy. To-morrow we will repair as far as to the bridge of Pahling, and give her a parting feast."

With many tears the lady prepares to take her journey to the inhospitable north, and the emperor escorts her the first stage. A bitter parting here takes place, and she pursues her solitary way to the Tartar camp. The khan, overcome by her beauty, receives her with effusion, and orders his invading army to retreat to his khanate. In due course they arrive at the frontier river, the name of which the lady asks of her lord. On being told that it is the river of the Black Dragon, which divides the emperor's territory from that of the khan, she drinks a cup of wine in honour of the khan, pours out a libation in the direction of the emperor's palace, and throws herself into the stream. The khan makes every effort to save her, but in vain, and his regret for her loss and for her untimely fate is coupled with a hearty desire to inflict punishment on Mao for the evil he had wrought. Full of regret at the wrong he had been induced to do the emperor, he determines to send an envoy to make terms of binding peace with his neighbour, and hands over Mao to the tender mercies of his rightful master.

The scene now changes again to the emperor's palace, and we are shown the emperor still mourning the loss of his bride, and offering incense before her portrait. Presently he sleeps, and in a vision of the night the lady Chao appears before him and vanishes as he wakes. At that moment the Tartar envoy arrives, bringing Mao with him. His story is soon told. Peace is established, and Mao expiates his crimes at the hand of the executioner.

Some of the scenes in this play are full of pathos,

and the story is told with very considerable dignity and feeling. The moral, as in all Chinese plays, tends to elevate virtue, and to hold up tyranny and wrong to just execration. The fact that the emperor should have been so weak and cowardly as to yield to the khan's demands does not, from a Chinese point of view, seriously affect his character. So long as he gives vent to exalted aspirations and highly patriotic sentiments his conduct is of minor consequence. The same inconsistency is as observable in real life at the present day as in the "Sorrows of Han." The emperor and his ministers pour out in the pages of the 'Peking Gazette' sentiments which should belong to the most virtuous of mankind, and which are held to cover the vices and follies which daily disgrace the court and the empire.

The same inconsistency is observable in the plays which represent the everyday life of the people. Characters which on our stage would be reckoned as infamous are allowed to whitewash themselves by the expression of lofty moral utterances, and to enjoy the odour of sanctity in recognition of their high-sounding professions. For example, in the well-known play entitled "The Son of his Old Age," the old father behaves most unfeelingly to the mother of his son, and with great cruelty towards his nephew, and yet he is described as a pattern of virtue when at the end of the play he makes some amends for his misdeeds and expresses himself in well-rounded periods. This play was considered by Voltaire worthy to be adapted for the French stage. In his opinion it was superior to anything that Europe could boast of at

the time at which it was written, and no doubt such was the case. But unhappily the dramatic art has not advanced in China as in Europe, and the plays of later ages, so far from improving in matter and manner on those of the twelfth century, have rather retrograded.

It is curious to find in them, as well as in many stories, incidents which bear striking resemblances to events narrated in the Bible. This is by no means uncommon, and it is within the bounds of possibility that just as the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife has spread all over Western Asia, other incidents may have been borrowed from the sacred book. The story of Balaam's ass is with variations reproduced in a well-known collection of Chinese tales. In the Chinese version a judge's clerk was going to a neighbouring town to make an investment. As he rode along, his ass's pace became so very slow that in his impatient anger he beat the creature unmercifully. To his boundless surprise, instead of, as at other times, receiving the chastisement in silence, the ass spoke, and remonstrated energetically against the cruelty inflicted on him, pleading his length of faithful service. Upon this new departure the clerk dismounted and led the gifted creature the rest of the way. In like manner, in a play, the plot of which may be briefly sketched, an incident bearing a likeness to the judgment of Solomon is introduced. In this drama, which is called "A Circle of Chalk," we are first admitted to a stormy scene at the house of a widow who is ambitious to bestow her beautiful daughter as a secondary wife on a wealthy but childless neighbour, Ma by name. The

family is miserably poor, and the girl is as anxious for the alliance as her mother. But the son, Changlin, stoutly objects to his sister taking a secondary position in any household, and when he finds his remonstrances unavailing, shakes the dust of the house off his shoes and leaves the neighbourhood. So soon as he is gone the marriage takes place, and before long the bride presents her husband with a son. For a time all goes well on the surface, although the first wife cherishes a deeply rooted jealousy of the superior fortune of Haitang. While matters are in this position, Changlin, who has been reduced to extreme want, returns to his mother's house, which he finds empty, and in reply to his inquiries the neighbours tell him that his mother is dead, and that Haitang is the happy wife of Ma and the mother of his son. In his extremity all his high protestations disappear, and he goes to Ma's house to beg bread from his sister. She receives him with scorn, taunts him with former professions, and turns him out into the street. Weary and exhausted, he throws himself on the doorstep, and is there found by Mrs Ma, who, learning from him that he is Haitang's brother, brings him in and tells Haitang to give him her hair ornaments and trinkets that he may buy himself food. To Haitang's question, "What will Ma say if I give away his presents?" she replies that she will undertake to explain matters to their common husband. Haitang therefore does as she is told, and Changlin carries off her jewellery. Mrs Ma, we are told, has been carrying on a flirtation with a judge's clerk named Chao, and has received from him some poison with

which to get rid of her husband in his favour. She now sees her opportunity, and when on his return home Ma asks her what Haitang has done with her trinkets, she invents a story in which she describes her rival as having given them to an old lover who had fallen into poverty. In his anger Ma, without asking Haitang for an explanation, beats her unmercifully. While she is yet aching with the blows she has received, Mrs Ma orders her to prepare a basin of soup for her husband. When Haitang brings the soup, Mrs Ma sends her for some salt, and in her absence, and while her husband's back is turned, she pours the poison into the basin. Haitang then enters and presents the soup to Ma, who having taken it, falls dead on the floor. Mrs Ma's course is now clear. She charges Haitang with the murder of her husband, and in order to secure the family property claims Haitang's son as her own.

The case is carried to the magistrate's court, where Chao has managed to secure the influence of the mandarin and a goodly *posse* of friendly witnesses. On the charge of murder Haitang is speedily committed for trial, and Chao's suborned witnesses declare that the boy is the son of Mrs Ma. On this point the magistrate is evidently not clear, and he orders a policeman to draw a circle of chalk on the floor of the courtyard. In the centre of this he places the boy, and tells each of the two women to hold one of his hands at opposite sides of the circle, and to pull one against the other. The one who pulled him to her was to be considered the mother. Mrs Ma roughly seizes the hand nearest to her, but Haitang,

fearing to hurt the tender arms of her child, refuses the contest, and her opponent gains the day. Very unlike Solomon, the magistrate considers this result to be satisfactory, and awards the child to the pretended mother. Poor Haitang, loaded with a *cangue*, is put into prison, and is after some time taken to the provincial capital for trial before the governor of the province. At a restaurant at the outskirts of the city, where her jailers stop for refreshment, she meets her brother, who has gained employment in the governor's office, and is in a flourishing condition. While Haitang is telling him her story, Mrs Ma and Chao arrive at the same halting-place, on their way to give evidence against the accused. The appearance of these two conspirators in company convinces Changlin of the accuracy of Haitang's account of the whole plot, and he repeats to the governor the story as he had received it. The governor, thus put on his guard, severely cross-examines Chao, who, though brave at first, eventually loses his nerve and makes a full confession of the plot, throwing, however, the whole blame on Mrs Ma, who retaliates by accusing him of having suggested the murder of Ma, and of having given her the poison. The crooked places are thus made straight. Haitang is acquitted, and is given both her son and Ma's wealth; Chao and Mrs Ma are put to death by the slicing process; while the magistrate is degraded for his want of discrimination. Thus all ends happily, although it is difficult to feel much sympathy for any of the characters. But the Chinese playwright has attained his object when he secures the

punishment of the principal offenders, and he is content to leave to the compassion of the audience the other principal characters, whose imperfections may be held to have been expiated by their misfortunes.

Farces are very popular with the Chinese people, who, though matter of fact, are possessed of a keen sense of humour, and delight in the presentation on the stage of situations which are provocative of laughter. As among all Eastern nations, these situations are often such as would not be permitted for a moment in an English theatre. On the other hand, many of the plots are counterparts of pieces which are nightly played in Paris and in London. Not only in plot but in name a farce which is very popular in Northern China is identical with a play which is well known both on the French and English stages. *Chieh chi* may be translated into French by the well-known title of "Prêtez-moi votre femme," which has become familiarised among us. In the Chinese play an impecunious ne'er-do-weel applies for help to his uncle, who refuses to give him a *cash* until he shall have married, and thus shown a disposition to settle down. The nephew is quite willing to marry, but not unnaturally he finds a difficulty in getting any one to marry him in his present out-of-elbows condition. He therefore goes to a friend and asks him to lend his wife, to go as his bride on a visit to his uncle, who lives some few miles away. The friend consents on condition that the expedition does not occupy many hours. The bargain being thus struck, our hero hires two carts, which it chances are so delayed in coming up to the house that it is late

before a start is made. On arriving at their destination the hero introduces the lady as his wife, and both his uncle and aunt are delighted at his choice. In the discussion of family matters and other congenial subjects the time slips away, and before the meal given in their honour is finished the evening closes in on them. The uncle now insists on their remaining for the night, and in spite of their most earnest protestations, orders the servants to prepare the best bedroom for their reception. The despair of the pseudo-bride and the misery of the hero are amusingly described, and with the most acute feelings of horror they are finally solemnly conducted by the uncle and aunt to their chamber. Left alone, they consult as to what is to be done, and they agree to sit up all night and long for the day. At earliest dawn a thundering knocking is heard at the front door, and a servant comes in to say that there is a man outside demanding his wife, who, he asserts, is no other than our hero's bride. Fearing that the noise should disturb his uncle, our hero goes to the front door and attempts to quiet his friend. This is more than he can do, and the intruder insists on seeing his wife, and demands an explanation. A terrible scene ensues, in which all the characters take part. For some time confusion reigns supreme, but finally matters are so explained to the outraged husband that he becomes satisfied and carries off his wife, leaving our hero to the just reproaches of his uncle, who sees even less reason than ever to help so graceless a nephew.

Many of the foregoing remarks are aptly illustrated

in the stories and ballads which will be found in the following pages, and which are here reprinted by permission from 'Blackwood's Magazine,' the 'Cornhill Magazine,' the 'Hour Glass,' 'Atalanta,' the 'Illustrated London News,' and the 'St James's Gazette.' For reasons which have been already sufficiently indicated, these stories have not been translated literally from the original; but while the plots and incidents have been faithfully retained, they have been pruned and adapted to meet the requirements of Western readers. As illustrating the popular literature of China they have more than a passing interest. They hold up, as it were, a mirror to the life of the people, and thus bring home to our consciousness the fact that human passions and feelings are much the same on the banks of the Yang-tsze-kiang as on the shores of the Thames.

ROBERT K. DOUGLAS.

British Museum, *November* 1, 1892.

CHINESE STORIES

CHINESE STORIES.

A MATRIMONIAL FRAUD.

ADAPTED FROM A CHAPTER OF A CHINESE NOVEL.

ONE hot August afternoon the Prefect of Ping-chow might have been seen sitting in the verandah of his private apartments smoking his post-prandial pipe and admiring the flowers, which threw a fragrance and beauty over the courtyard which stretched before him. The official work of the morning had fatigued him. Litigants had been troublesome, and as witnesses had refused to give the evidence expected of them, he had been obliged to resort to the application of thumb-screws and ankle-squeezers. Having a natural repugnance to torture, its use always disturbed him; and after such occasions as the present, he exchanged his seat in the judgment-hall for his easy-chair and pipe with a redoubled sense of enjoyment. On this particular afternoon his wife, Mrs Le, was seated by him, and was re-

counting, among other events of the morning, the particulars of a visit she had received from a certain Mrs Wang.

"From the moment she entered the room I took a dislike to her," she said. "She had a fawning, catlike manner, with her 'May it please you, madam,' or 'May I be permitted to say, your Excellency;' and all the while that she was thus fawning on me and praising *your* learning and wisdom, I felt sure she had some object in coming besides the desire to pay her respects. Then she went on to say how rich her husband was, and how willing he would be at any time to advance you money in case you should need it. At last out came the canker-worm from this rosebud of flattery. Her son, it seems, is very anxious to marry a Miss Chang, the daughter of a rich President of the Board of War, who is at present engaged on service on the Annamese frontier. His suit is countenanced by the young lady's uncle, but is rejected by herself."

"And why?"

"Well, according to Mrs Wang,—but then I should not believe anything because she said it,—there is some clandestine love affair which disinclines her to the proposed match. As her father is away, it was necessary that she should be consulted, although, of course, her uncle would be justified, as Mrs Wang hinted, in arranging matters in his absence."

At this moment a servant entered the courtyard and presented to the Prefect a red visiting-card, on which was inscribed the name of Mr Wang, the father of the would-be bridegroom.

"Why, this is the husband of your visitor of this morning," said he, as he glanced at the card. "They are evidently determined to push on the affair. If they are as keen in the pursuit of virtue as they are of this marriage, they will soon out-virtue Confucius."

"My belief is," said his wife sententiously, "that they might dine off their virtue without breaking their fast."

"Well, at all events, I will go to hear what this man has to say; but having fortunately seen his hook, I shall refuse the bait, however skilfully he may throw the line."

The host and his guest were as unlike as it was possible for two men to be. The Prefect moved into the room with the manner of a polished gentleman,—one who, being well assured of his relative position, knew perfectly what was expected of him, and what he had a right to expect from others. He was tall too, and his refined features expressed a composure which was engendered by power and assured by habit. Wang, on the other hand, was his antipodes. He was short, stout, broad-featured, and altogether vulgar-looking. His eyes were small and ferret-like in their restlessness, while his natural awkwardness of manner was aggravated by a consciousness that he had come on a dishonest mission. As the two men met and bowed, the Prefect surveyed his guest with curiosity not unmixed with loathing, much as a young lady might regard a strange kind of toad. To his repeated requests that Wang would seat himself, that worthy feigned a constant refusal, until at last,

in despair, the Prefect was fain to sit down, when his guest, with bated breath, followed his example. The progress of the interview was not more propitious

"The Prefect surveyed his guest with curiosity not unmixed with loathing."

than its opening. Wang attempted some classical allusions, but having but a vague knowledge of his-

tory, succeeded only in likening his host to the reprobate Chow-sin. Being a stupid man also, he was quite unaware of the contempt which was sufficiently obvious in the Prefect's manner, and he opened the real object of his visit with assurance.

"The presence of your Excellency in our district has shed a ray of golden light among us. But a lamp, as I well know, cannot give light unless it is supplied with oil. Now Mencius said—I think it was Mencius, was it not, your Excellency?—that out of their superfluity people ought to satisfy the wants of those not so bountifully provided for. If, then, your Excellency should at any time require that which it is within the power of your servant to supply, I beseech you to give him the gratification of knowing that he can be of service to you."

"As your classical knowledge is so profound," answered the Prefect, "you doubtless remember the passage in which an ancient sage declares that an official who receives anything, except in return for services performed, is a 'fellow.' Now it happens that I am not inclined to play the part of a 'fellow.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Wang, who thought this was a hint for him to state his business in full, "your Excellency, I see, likes to come to the point. The fact is, then, that my son is deeply enamoured of a Miss Chang, whom he once saw from a window in her uncle's house as she walked in her garden. Her beauty has completely ravished him. He can neither eat nor sleep from the intensity of his passion, and his very life depends upon his marrying her. Besides, I don't mind saying to your Excellency that

the connection,—her father is a President of the Board of War,—would be both agreeable and useful to me."

"I am sure I wish your son every success," said the Prefect; "but I cannot see how otherwise the affair concerns me in the least."

"Why, is not your Excellency the 'father and mother' of your people? and in the absence, therefore, of the President, it is on you that the duty falls of arranging a marriage for this young lady. As was said by Confucius, 'Every girl on arriving at a marriageable age should be betrothed;' and it is plain, therefore, that Miss Chang's bridal presents should be prepared. If your Excellency would deign to direct the betrothal of this young lady and my unworthy son, my joy would be endless, and my gratitude without bounds. I may mention, also, that Mr Chang, the young lady's uncle, who is in every way a most estimable man, cordially supports my son's suit."

"But why," asked the Prefect, "does the young lady decline the proposal which I understand you have already made her?"

"Well, the fact is," said Wang, "that she has formed a foolish attachment for a young man who some months ago met with a bad accident outside her door, and who was carried into her house to die, as every one thought. But, marvellous to say, by the doctor's care and the watchful attention of the lady's servants, he recovered. Unfortunately, however, his cure took some time; and during his convalescence, it seems that the two young people held

several conversations together, always, I am bound to say, through an impenetrable screen, and in the presence of attendants; and she was so struck with his sentiments and appearance—for I am told that she managed to see him, though he never caught a glimpse of her—that she vowed a vow never to marry any one but him."

"And who was the young man?"

"His name was Tieh (iron); and he must have been as hard as iron not to have been killed by his fall, for he fell on his head and was kicked by his horse. He doubtless has a certain kind of ability, as he has just taken the third degree, or that of 'advanced scholar,' and was on his way home from his examination at Peking when he met with his accident."

"A certain amount of ability, indeed!" ejaculated the Prefect; "why, the whole capital rang with praises of his scholarship; and in his native town a tablet has already been raised, as a memorial of his conspicuous success. However, as you have appealed to me officially on behalf of your son, I will cause inquiries to be made, and will let you know my determination."

The Prefect was as good as his word, and the reports he received, both of the Wang family and of the young lady's uncle, were so eminently unsatisfactory, that he directed his secretary to write a short letter to Mr Wang, stating that he must decline to interfere in the matter.

On receipt of this note, the look of cunning which usually rested on the coarse and blurred features of

the elder Wang, changed into one of furious hate. Never having been accustomed to exercise self-restraint in anything, his anger, like the many other passions which alternately possessed him, raged with unchecked fury, and he broke out with a volley of imprecations, calling down endless maledictions on the Prefect personally, and casting frightful imputations on the honour of his ancestors both male and female. Hearing his curses—for, like all Chinamen, Wang found shouting a relief to his feelings—Mrs Wang rushed in to know their cause.

"Nicely you managed matters with the Prefect's wife, you hideous deformity!" screamed her infuriated husband as she entered. "The hypocritical prig now refuses to have anything to do with the marriage, and has actually returned, without a word, the bill of exchange for a thousand taels which I enclosed him."

"And you don't seem to have done much better with the 'hypocritical prig' yourself," replied his wife; "but don't be a fool; cursing people's grandmothers won't do you any good, and certainly won't do them any harm. So just sit down and let us see what we had better do in the circumstances."

These words fell like a cold shower-bath on Wang. In his heart he was afraid of his wife, who was both cleverer and more unscrupulous than he was, and who, having been the instigator of most of his unrighteous deeds, was in possession of secrets which left his peace of mind, and even his liberty, very much in her power. In all such matters as were at present in dispute, therefore, she took the lead, and

on this occasion sat herself down opposite her disturbed lord, and began—

"Well now, since we cannot expect any help from this pattern of assumed virtue, I think we had better try what the girl's uncle will be able to effect by cajolery. You must go to him at once, before the

"You hideous deformity!"

idea gets abroad that the Prefect is against us, and persuade him by promises of money to represent to his niece that he now stands in the place of a father to her, and that as such he strongly urges her to agree to the match. Let him dangle every bait

likely to catch our fish that he can think of. He should enlarge on our wealth, on our influence with the official classes, and on the good looks and engaging qualities of our son. Living so completely secluded as she does, she is not likely to have heard of his escapades, and Chang can at times lay the paint on thick, I know. But before you start, take a few pipes of opium to steady your nerves. Your hand shakes as though you had the ague, and you look like a man on the verge of the Yellow Springs." [1]

This last advice was so thoroughly congenial that Wang at once retired to follow it. His wife, having compassion on his quivering fingers, accompanied him to his study, and having arranged his pillow, proceeded to fill his pipe. With practised skill, she mixed the paste with a long needle, and gathering on the point a piece about the size of a pea, laid it neatly in the small orifice in the centre of the surface of the flat-topped wooden receptacle which protruded from the side of the long stem. When thus prepared, she handed the pipe to her recumbent husband, who eagerly clutched it, and applied the pellet of opium to the lamp which stood ready lighted on the divan. The effect of the first few whiffs was magical. His face, which a few moments before had been haggard with excitement, and twitching with nervous irritability, now softened down into a calm and placid expression; his eyes lost their restless, anxious look; and his limbs, which had been drawn up with muscular rigidity, relaxed their ten-

[1] *I.e.*, Hades.

sion. Once, twice, and thrice did Mrs Wang refill his pipe; and then, fearing lest a prolonged indulgence should disincline him to move, she urged him to rise and to pay his visit.

Refreshed and calmed, Wang arose. All his excitement had disappeared, and a sensation of pleasurable enjoyment, which threw a rose-tinted hue even on the present state of affairs, had succeeded to it. A very few minutes sufficed for the arrangement of his toilet. The application of a damp towel to his face and hands, a few passes of a wooden comb to smooth backwards the stray locks which had escaped from his queue, and a readjustment of his cap and robe, were all that were needed to fit him for his interview with Chang. As he was borne swiftly through the streets he leaned back in his sedan, lost in a reverie, in which he saw, as in a dream, his son married to the object of his admiration, himself decorated by the Emperor with a blue button in exchange for a few thousand taels; and the Prefect, bound hand and foot, being carried off to prison. Whether this last vision was suggested or not by an official procession which he encountered on the way, will never be known; for so lost was he in dreamy indifference to external objects, that he was quite unconscious of the presence of his arch-enemy in the same street, although his chair coolies had, as in duty bound, stood at the side of the road while "the great man" passed on his way.

Having been warned by a forerunner of the approaching arrival of Wang, Chang was waiting ready to receive him. Profoundly the two friends bowed

to one another as they seated themselves on the divan; and after a remark or two on general topics, Wang went straight to the point. He related the Prefect's refusal to interfere, and then enlarged on the proposal indicated by his wife, and ended up by making Chang the offer of a round sum of money in case he succeeded in arranging matters with his niece. Chang listened patiently, feeling confident, from his knowledge of his guest, that a bribe would be offered him, and being well assured that it would be the inducement held out last, though in reality first, in importance. The sum named settled the question so far as Chang was concerned. He was a needy man, being considerably in debt; and besides, he foresaw that if he could once induce his niece to regard him *in loco parentis*, he would be able to get into his hands, for a time at least, the management of his brother's property. This trust, he knew well, might be turned to profitable account, and his eyes sparkled at the prospect that loomed large before him. When, therefore, Wang ceased to speak, he said, with effusion—

"I have listened to your commands, and have been overcome with admiration at the lucidity of your expressions, the knowledge you possess of the rites of antiquity, and the general wisdom of your views. It remains only for me to say that I will obey your orders to the best of my mean ability, and that I regard with infinite gratitude your munificent intentions towards your 'younger brother.' Let me now offer for your refreshment a pipe of 'foreign dirt.'"

Without waiting for assent Chang nodded to a servant, who, being evidently used to the habit, left

the room and speedily returned bearing two small lacquer-trays, each of which contained an opium-pipe and the necessary adjuncts. By the side of both his master and Wang, who were now recumbent, he placed a tray, and then withdrew, leaving the two friends to the enjoyments of intoxication. Pipe after pipe they smoked, until at last their pipes dropped from their mouths, and they passed into the opium-smoker's paradise—a state of dreamy unconsciousness, in which strangely fanciful visions passed before their otherwise sightless eyes, and strains of sweetest music charmed and delighted their ears. It was late the next morning before they awoke, and it was then plain, from the expression of their faces, that the pleasurable sensations of the early part of the night had long since passed away. Their eyes, which were surrounded by broad black rims, bore a haggard and painful look. Their lips were blue and parched, and their complexions wore a mahogany hue, as though saturated with their favourite narcotic. Many "hairs of the dog that had bitten him" and some hours' quiet rest were necessary before Chang was in a fit condition to pay his visit of persuasion to his niece. When at last he walked across to her house, he was shown, by right of his relationship, into her private apartment,—which even he could not fail to observe was prettily furnished and tastefully adorned. Flowers of every hue and shape—azaleas, hydrangeas, and roses—were arranged about it on stands in symmetrical confusion; while on the tables and sideboard was displayed a wealth of ancient bronzes, cracked china, and old enamel vases, which would have

driven most collectors wild with excitement. The walls were hung with scrolls, on some of which celebrated caligraphists had inscribed sentences from the classics, which Chang did not very well understand; and on others, distant hills, dotted with temples and enlivened by waterfalls, were depicted by old masters. One cool and shady scene, representing two old men playing at chess on a mountain-top beneath a wide-spreading pine-tree, and attended by boys bearing pipes and flasks, which might possibly be supposed to contain tea, especially attracted his attention; and so absorbed was he in the contemplation of it, that he was quite unaware that an even more attractive object had entered the room. Plum-blossom, for so the new arrival was named, seemed at first indisposed to interrupt her uncle's meditation, and stood watching him, holding the door in her hand. She had evidently attired herself with some care. Her hair was trimly arranged in a bunch on each side, after the manner of maidens; while a short fringe drooped over her forehead, which was both high and broad. Her silken robe hung in graceful folds over her plaited satin petticoat, from beneath which her small embroidered shoes obtruded their toes. In figure she was tall; and her features, which were fine and sharply marked, told a tale of high breeding and intelligence. Her eyes were large and well opened, and paid their tribute to her race by being slightly drawn up towards the outside corners. Her complexion needed neither powder nor rouge to add to its beauty; and the expression of her countenance generally was bright and mobile. Even Chang, when

"HE WAS QUITE UNAWARE THAT AN EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE OBJECT HAD ENTERED THE ROOM."—*Page 16.*

she advanced to meet him, rose to greet her with admiring cordiality.

After the first compliments were over, Chang proceeded to open the object of his visit. "You are aware, my niece," said he, "how much your future has been in my mind since your father has been engaged in his present distant and doubtful service. I need not remind you of the saying of Mencius, that 'when a boy is born, the desire of his parents is that he may found a household; and from the time a girl appears in the world, the main object of her parents is to see her married;' nor need I go on to quote to you the sage's disapproval of all such who so far forsake the right path as to bore holes in partition walls and peep behind screens to catch glimpses of persons of the other sex" (this was a stab at Mr Iron). "Now, as I cannot but regard myself in the light of your father, I feel it incumbent on me to urge you to give your consent to be betrothed. I have made inquiries as to the young men of equal rank with yourself in the district, and with one consent my informants join in extolling the young Mr Wang, of whom I have before spoken to you, as being in every way a carp among minnows and a phœnix among magpies."

"If the minnows are drunkards and magpies *roués*, that is true enough," muttered Violet, Plum-blossom's attendant maiden, who, standing behind her mistress's chair, had listened with ill-concealed disgust to Chang's address. Fortunately Chang's senses were not very acute, and the interpolation was unnoticed by him.

"But, uncle," answered Plum-blossom, "though it

is true that my father is engaged on a distant mission, and that I have not heard from him for a long time, yet I have no right to assume either that he is dead—which may the Fates forbid—or that he may not at any moment return; and according to the 'Book of Rites,' it is the father who should betroth his daughter. My obvious duty is therefore to wait until I hear something definite either from him or of him."

"What you say is perfectly true in a general way," said Chang; "but even the sages acknowledged that, under certain circumstances, it was allowable, and sometimes even necessary, to depart from the common usage. Now yours is a case where such a departure is plainly called for. I have talked over the matter with the Prefect," added Chang, with some slight embarrassment, "and he is entirely of my opinion."

"That certainly adds weight to your arguments," answered Plum-blossom, demurely; "for though I have no personal knowledge of the Prefect, I have repeatedly heard of his fame as a man of wisdom and uprightness. So I will go as far as to say, uncle, that if you choose to act in all respects a father's part in this matter, I will give my consent. But, tell me, have you spoken on the subject to the young gentleman himself? I hope you have not been paying me compliments behind my back."

"I have spoken to him several times about the match," replied Chang; "but I should no more think of attempting to compliment you, as you say, than I should try to whiten a cloth washed in the waters of

the Han or Keang and bleached in the sun. And, let me tell you, your good sense was never more apparent than at this moment. I felt convinced that a girl of your perception and wisdom would fall into the proposal which I, wholly and entirely in your interest, have so repeatedly made you. And now you know there will be a number of arrangements to be made," said Chang, determined to strike while the iron was hot; "and first of all, you must send to your future husband the eight characters representing the year, month, day, and hour of your birth, that they may be submitted to the fortune-teller."

"But already, uncle," said Plum-blossom, "you are breaking your agreement; and remember, if you break yours I may break mine. You undertook to act the part of a father to me, and it is therefore for you to send the *Pă-tsze*" (eight characters).

"You may be quite sure that I shall not retreat from my engagement," replied Chang; "but that there may not be any mistake, I should like you to write me a draft of the characters, that I may send them to be copied in gold, and that," he added aside, "I may hold your own handwriting as evidence against you, if by any chance you should turn fickle and change your mind."

"Certainly;" and calling for paper and pencil, Plum-blossom wrote down eight cyclical characters, and presented them to her uncle.

"Oh, lady, what have you done?" exclaimed Violet, wringing her hands as the door closed on Chang; "if you only knew as much about that young Wang as I do, you would die sooner than

marry him. He is a brawler, a drunkard, an opium-smoker, a——"

"Hush!" said her mistress; "perhaps I know more than you think I do. And now listen to what I say. Don't feel or express surprise at anything I say or do in this matter: and as to the outside world, keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth shut."

The look of despair which had taken possession of Violet's quaint-looking features gradually gave way under the influence of these words to one of surprised bewilderment. Her narrow slits of eyes opened their widest as she gazed with a searching look on the features of her mistress. By degrees she appeared to gather comfort from her inspection, and she promised implicit obedience to the instructions given her.

In the house of Chang there was wild rejoicing over the event. Only Mrs Chang seemed to have any misgiving. "I cannot make the girl out," she said. "It was but the other day that she vowed and declared she would not listen to the match, and now, with scarcely a show of resistance, she gives way. I hope she won't change her mind again as suddenly."

"There is no danger of her doing that," replied her husband, "for I persuaded her to write out her natal characters with her own hand, and here is the paper;" and so saying, he drew from his sleeve the paper given him by Plum-blossom. "But," he added, "she insists that as I am acting in the place of her father in this matter, *I* must have the characters cut out in gold-leaf, and the cards prepared to send to the bride-groom. I should be quite willing to do this, but, as

a matter of fact, I have not got the money by me to pay for them."

"Oh, Wang will find the money readily enough. Go round to him at once and ask for it, and a little more in addition; and when the cards are ready, our eldest son shall act as emissary to take them to the bridegroom. It was a clever thought to get her to put pen to paper."

Mrs Chang was right. Wang produced the money almost with eagerness, and signalised the subsequent appearance of young Chang with the card by a sumptuous feast. In due course, also, the bridegroom, having prepared numerous and costly wedding-gifts, sent word to Chang that on a given day he would "humbly venture to send his paltry offering" to the young lady's "princely mansion." On receipt of this gratifying intimation, Chang went in high spirits to warn his niece of the intended ceremony.

"My dear uncle," said the young lady, "in the absence of my father, and in this empty and dismantled house, I could not possibly receive the presents. It would be neither proper to do so, nor would it be respectful to young Mr Wang. As you were kind enough to send the wedding-card for me, the return presents should, as a matter of course, be carried to your house; and besides, I cannot help feeling that as you have undertaken so much expense on my behalf, it is only fair that the presents, whatever they may be worth, should belong to you."

"Your wisdom and discretion really astonish me," said Chang, who could scarcely conceal his delight at

the prospect of turning the presents into gold; "but while assenting, on the ground of propriety, to the arrangement you propose, I think the card of thanks had better be in your handwriting."

"Certainly," said Plum-blossom; "but it must of course run in your name, as it would have done in my father's name had he been here."

So saying, she sat down and inscribed a card of thanks. "There, I think that will do. Listen to what I have written: 'Chang Teming bows his head in acknowledgment of the wedding-presents sent to his daughter.'"

"Why put 'his daughter'?" objected Chang, doubtingly. "Young Wang is not going to marry my poor ugly daughter,—I wish he were; it is you, my niece."

"But as you have, with so much kindness and disinterestedness, taken upon yourself the part of a father towards me, it follows that I must be your daughter. To call yourself 'my father,' and me 'your niece,' would make people laugh and wonder."

"Very well, be it as you will," rejoined Chang, overcome by Plum-blossom's logic.

The new view proposed by his niece as to the ownership of the presents gave Chang an additionally keen interest in their arrival and value; and certainly nothing on the score of costliness could have been more gratifying to him than they were. So soon as he had carefully arranged them with his own hands in the family hall, he invited Plum-blossom over to inspect them. She expressed admiration at the taste shown in their choice, and at their great intrinsic

value, and congratulated her uncle on their acquisition, adding, at the same time, that as she had no brother, the bulk of the family property would, she supposed, like these presents, pass into his possession.

"But whatever happens," said Chang, with a wave of his hand as though all such sordid ideas were abhorrent to him, "remember I shall always consider you as a daughter, and hope that you will in the same way look upon me in the light of a father."

If Chang had observed closely his niece's face as he spoke, he would have seen an expression of suppressed amusement, which might either have suggested to him the possibility that she had doubts on the subject of his disinterestedness, or given him reason to suspect that some scheme lurked beneath her seemingly extremely yielding demeanour. But his mind was just then so full of the prospect of freedom from debt, and of large perquisites, that such a trivial matter as his niece's face was obviously beneath his notice.

To young Wang the favourable turn which affairs had taken was an unfailing source of delight, and was marred only by the enforced exercise of patience required by the astrologer, who, after comparing the ticket of nativity sent by Chang with that of the intending bridegroom, had pronounced that the 15th of the next month was the date prescribed by fortune for the nuptials. At last the fateful day arrived, as all days will, however long waited for; and at early morn the impatient bridegroom sent his best-man to Chang to announce that on that same evening he should come to claim his bride. Chang could scarcely restrain his impatience sufficiently to perform pro-

perly the duties of a host to the welcome emissary; and no sooner had that young gentleman executed his last bow outside the front door, than his entertainer hurried over to Plum-blossom to warn her of the bridegroom's intended arrival. Demurely the young lady listened to her uncle's excited congratulations, and with an expression of assumed unconsciousness on her uplifted face, replied—

"But, my dear uncle, although I am profoundly interested in the future welfare of my cousin, Autumn-leaf, yet you can hardly expect me, I am sure, in my present condition of doubt as to my father's whereabouts, and even his life, to appear at the wedding; and I am at a loss, therefore, to understand why you, who must have so much to do, should have thought it necessary to inform me in such haste of the coming event."

Surprise, doubt, fear, and anger coursed in turn across Chang's features as these words fell upon his confused ears; and when his niece ceased to speak, all four sensations found full expression both in his countenance and voice.

"What do you mean," he hissed out, "by speaking of my daughter's marriage? Are you joking, or are you trying to play me false? It is you that young Wang is coming to marry, and it is you he shall marry this very night."

"My dear uncle, you are strangely inconsistent in this matter. If you will take the trouble to think, you will recollect that the wedding-cards were made out in the name of 'your daughter,' and that when the presents arrived at your house—not at mine,

remember, uncle—you returned thanks for 'your daughter.' It is plain, then, that my cousin was the intended bride; for had you meant me, you would have spoken of me as your 'youngest daughter,' or 'adopted daughter'; but there was no such qualification, was there, uncle? I can assure you, also, that I have no present intention of marrying, and least of all marrying such a man as Wang, who, though he enjoys the benefit of your friendship, would hardly, I fear, prove a congenial companion to me." Plum-blossom could not deny herself this Parthian shot.

Chang listened like one thunder-struck; then springing from his chair, he paced up and down the room with long strides, giving vent to his passion in violent and most unoriental gesticulations.

"You deceitful wretch!" he cried, "do you suppose that I am going to be cheated and outraged by an ignorant young girl like you? I'll *make* you marry Wang; and," he added, as a sudden thought struck him, "though you may think yourself very clever, you have forgotten that you have left an evidence in my hand of your consent to the match. A murderer, you know, ought to destroy his weapon, and a thief should hide his crowbar; but you have given me, in your own handwriting, the evidence against you. I have only to produce your autograph-ticket of nativity before the Prefect, and he would order you to fulfil the contract."

This last retort Chang expected would have silenced Plum-blossom, or at least disconcerted her, but her outward calm was unruffled.

"Your answer would be complete, uncle," she replied, with almost a smile, "but for one small circumstance, which, strangely enough, you appear to have overlooked. The cyclical characters on the ticket represented the year, month, day, and hour of my cousin's birth, not mine."

The sound of a chuckle of suppressed laughter from behind the door where Violet was hidden, was interrupted by a vehement outburst from Chang.

"He burst out of the room."

"You lie!" he shouted; "and I will prove it." So saying, he burst out of the room so suddenly that he nearly knocked down Violet, who was in the act of peeping round the corner to watch the effect of her mistress's words.

"Oh, my lady!" she exclaimed, as Chang's retreating figure disappeared, "how could you be so calm and quiet when he was raging so?"

"Because," replied Plum-blossom, "I had him in the palm of my hand, being conscious of my own integrity and of his evil intentions. Don't you

remember how Confucius played a tune on his lyre when he and his disciples were attacked by banditti? And if he could show such indifference to danger in circumstances of so great peril, should not I be able to preserve a calm demeanour in the presence of this storming bully?"

The sound of Chang's returning footsteps drove Violet again into her place of concealment. "There," he said as he entered the room, "is the paper you gave me; and now deny your own handwriting if you dare."

"Please sit down, uncle, and let me ask you one or two questions. What was the date of my birth?"

"You were born on the 15th of the 8th month, in the second watch. I and your father were, as it happened, drinking to the full moon when the news was brought us."

"And when did your daughter, Autumn-leaf, first see the light?"

"On the 6th of the 6th month, as I well remember; for the weather was so intensely hot that her mother's life was in danger."

"And now, uncle, will you read the date represented by the cyclical characters on the paper which you hold in your hand?"

"Oh, I don't know anything about cyclical characters," replied Chang. "Such knowledge," he added in a vain attempt to conceal his ignorance, "is only fit for astrologers and women."

"Is it possible," said Plum-blossom, in a tone of revengeful mockery, "that, with your wide circle of knowledge, you don't understand these simple char-

acters? Well then, let me, 'ignorant young girl' as I am, explain them to you. These first characters, *Ke wei*, stand for the month which is vulgarly known as the Serpent month, which, as perhaps you know, is the sixth month."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, these next characters, *Keă yin*, represent the sixth day of the month, and this is, therefore, the date of my cousin's birth, and not of mine—the year of our births being the same."

"You have attempted to ruin me," he said, "by an abominable fraud; but I will be even with you. I will impeach you before the Prefect, and then see whether you will be able to escape from the clutches of the law as easily as you think you have from mine."

"You had better not be in too great a hurry, uncle. From things I have lately heard, the Prefect has not been altogether acting with you in this matter; and if I were to charge you with attempting to decoy me into a marriage in the absence of my father and against my consent, it might go hardly with you."

"What does it matter?" groaned the wretched man, as he threw himself back in his chair; "I am ruined, whatever happens. So what can I do better than either throw myself into the well or take a dose of gold-leaf, and so end my miseries?"

"I have a better plan than either of those you suggest," said Plum-blossom; "and if you will listen to my advice, I think I can get you out of your difficulty. You would like to have your daughter married, I suppose?"

"Does not a weary man long to throw his burden off his back?"

"Very well, then, why should you not throw this burden into the lap of young Wang? He has throughout the business negotiated for 'your daughter'; then let him take your daughter."

"But he will discover the fraud."

"Not until it is too late. He won't see her face until she is his wife, and then he will be ashamed to confess that he has been hoodwinked."

"Well," said Chang, after a few minutes' reflection, "as it is the only way out of the difficulty, I will risk it. But there is no time to be lost; and the least you can do, after the way you have behaved, is to come over and help us with the arrangements, for young Wang is to be here this evening."

Peace being thus restored, the unnatural allies went to propose their scheme to Autumn-leaf. That young lady, who was as free from any bashfulness or refined feeling as her worthy parent, was delighted at the idea. Being very plain in appearance and ungainly in figure, she had entertained but faint hopes of matrimony, and the prospect, therefore, of gaining a husband so rich as young Wang was charming beyond measure to her. She at once consented to play the part required, and, without a moment's loss of time, prepared to bedeck herself for the occasion. Anticipating the marriage, Chang had arranged everything in readiness except the bride. The decorations and scarlet hangings were all at hand, and a very few hours' work sufficed to adorn the family hall and altar with the splendours usual on such occasions. But

the bride was not so easily beautified. However, after all the resources of Plum-blossom's wardrobe, as well as her own, had been exhausted in choosing dresses and petticoats which became her best, she was pronounced presentable. Much the confederates trusted to the long red veil which was to cover her face and person until her arrival at her new home; and minute were the directions which Plum-blossom gave her for concealing her features until the next morning.

"Assume a modesty, even if you don't feel bashful. Shrink within the curtains when your husband approaches you, and protest against his keeping the lamp alight. If in the morning there should be an outbreak of anger on his part, try to soften him with tears; and if that should prove unavailing, pretend to be in despair and threaten suicide. No man likes a fuss and a scandal; and after a time, you may be quite sure he will settle down quietly."

Primed with this excellent advice, Autumn-leaf went through the ceremonies of the day without betraying herself. The awkwardness with which she entered the audience-hall and bowed to the bridegroom was put down by himself and his friends to natural timidity. The remaining rites she executed faultlessly. She did reverence to heaven and earth and to her ancestors, and finally entered the bridal sedan-chair which was to carry her to her new home with complete composure, much to the relief of her father, who all day long was so tremulous with nervous excitement, that, from time to time, he was compelled to seek courage from his opium-pipe.

"She was pronounced presentable."

When at last the doors were shut on the bridal pair his gratification was great, although, at the same time, it was painfully mingled with a sense of the possible evil consequences which might very likely ensue on the course he had taken. However, for the present there was freedom from anxiety, and he wisely determined to let the future take care of itself.

"I should like to see Mr Wang's face when he wakes to-morrow morning," said Violet, laughing, as she followed her mistress back to her apartments. "But," she added, as the sound of loud raps were heard at the front door, "who can that be knocking at the street gate so violently? He cannot, surely, have found out the trick already? If he has, what *will* you do?"

The first question was soon answered, for just as she finished speaking, a servant announced that the Prefect had sent his secretary to inquire whether Plum-blossom's marriage, which he had only just heard was in course of performance, was taking place with her full consent or not, as he was prepared to interfere in case she was being coerced; and at the same time to hand her a letter from her father which had been forwarded with the usual official despatches from Peking.

"Beg the secretary to assure the Prefect," replied Plum-blossom, "that his infinite kindness towards me is deeply engraven on my heart; and to inform him that, happily for me, it was not I who was married this evening but my cousin."

With impatience and deep emotion Plum-blossom

now turned to open her father's letter, the contents of which brought tears of delight to her eyes, and caused Violet to perform a dance as nearly resembling a fandango as is possible, with feet just two inches and a half long. That the President should have returned from the frontier covered with honours was only what Plum-blossom felt might have been looked for; but that he expected to arrive at Ping-chow on the very next day, was a cause of unspeakable joy and relief to her. This, however, was not quite all the news the letter contained. "I am bringing with me," wrote her father, "a young Mr Tieh, to whose foresight and courage I mainly attribute the successful issue of my mission."

WITHIN HIS DANGER.

"You stand within his danger, do you not?"
—*Merchant of Venice.*

IT was a common saying among the ancients that he who had visited Hang-chow had been to the City of Heaven. The modern Chinaman, breathing the same enthusiastic admiration for the most beautiful city in Eastern Asia, says, "See Hang-chow and die;" and unless we are to suppose that every traveller who has visited the town has been a victim to hallucinations, there are few spots on the surface of the earth which surpass in bright beauty the city and neighbourhood of Hang-chow. Earth, sky, and water there combine to form one of the most lovely pieces of landscape-gardening on a gigantic scale that it is possible to imagine; while the coloured roofs of the *yamun* and pagodas, the countless bridges and splendid temples of the city, present objects of man's art which are not unworthy of their natural environments. Even the wondrous beauty of the lake which washes the western wall of the city, is held to be heightened by the temples, palaces, and pavilions which adorn the islands scattered over its surface; while all

around it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the richest and most exquisite structure.

On summer evenings it is the habit of these noble citizens to take their pleasure on the lake in barges, which reflect in their bright decorations and luxurious fittings the meretricious beauty of their surroundings. In such a galley, one glorious evening in early autumn, the magistrate of Hang-chow was taking his ease at the close of a hard day's work, and by contact with the fresh breezes of heaven, was seeking to rid himself of the taint of chicanery, bribery, and intrigue which infected every nook and corner of his *yamun*. His *compagnon de voyage* was a Mr Tso, an old resident at Hang-chow, and one in whose judgment the magistrate placed much confidence. Being rich and independent, he could afford to hold his own opinions, even when they clashed with those of his present host; and accustomed as the magistrate was to the society of toadies, it was refreshing to find a man who did not hesitate to contradict him to his face. The evening was one rather for still enjoyment than for much talking, and for some minutes not a word had been spoken between the friends, when, on rounding a point in the lake, the boat sailed into view of the house and grounds, famed in local history as being the most beautiful among the beautiful, and as having descended in the Ts'êng family from father to son through countless generations.

"Well," said the magistrate, after gazing long and admiringly at the landscape, "if I were not the magistrate of Hang-chow, I would be Mr Ts'êng. What an enviable lot his is !—young, rich, talented, the

husband of a charming wife, if report speaks truly, and the owner of such a lovely house and gardens as those yonder. That willow clump is just the spot where Su Tungp'o would have loved to have written sonnets; and that mass of waving colour is enough to make Tsau Fuhing rise from his grave and seize his paint-brush again."

"I don't deny," replied Mr Tso, "that Ts'êng's lot has fallen to him in pleasant places. But though I should much like to exchange possessions with him, nothing would induce me to exchange personalities. He never seems really happy. His is one of those timid and fearful natures which are always either in the depths of misery or in the highest of spirits. He is so sensitive that the least thing disturbs him; and he is so dependent on outside influences, that a smile or a frown from Fortune either makes or mars him. And then, between ourselves, I have my doubts as to his scholarship. It is true that he passed his B.A. examination with honours, but it did so happen that his uncle was the chief examiner on the occasion; and though I don't charge either uncle or nephew with anything underhand, yet my son tells me that others are not so charitable."

"You are all, I think, hard on our friend," said the magistrate. "I don't know much of him, but I have always heard him spoken of as a man of learning and ability. However, I have written to invite him to my picnic on the lake to-morrow, and we will then try him at verse-making, and see what he is really made of."

That the magistrate's admiration for the Ts'êng

gardens was fully justified, every admirer of brilliant colouring would readily admit. Indeed no fairer prospect could be imagined, and as the autumn sun sent its slanting rays through the waving branches of the willows and oaks, and added lustre to the blood-red leaves of the maples, it was difficult to suppose that anything but peace and content could reign in so lovely a spot.

But Tso was not far wrong in his estimate of Ts'êng's character; and in addition to the bar to happiness presented by its infirmities, there was one dire misfortune which took much of the brightness out of his life. Though he had been married six years he had but one child, and that a daughter. It was true that he was devotedly fond of the little Primrose, as he called her, but nothing could make up to him for the failure of a son to carry on the succession of his name and fortune, and to continue the worship at the family graves.

At the very moment that the magistrate and his friend were passing down the lake, Ts'êng and his wife, Golden-lilies, were sitting in a pavilion, which stood in the midst of the flower-garden, surrounded by a profusion of blue hydrangeas, China asters, pomegranates, citrons, jasmines, peonias, honeysuckles, and other flowers indigenous to the favoured regions of Central China, watching Primrose chasing a curly-coated puppy along the crooked paths as well as her poor little cramped feet would allow her, and trying to catch the leaves which were beginning to sprinkle the earth with specks of every hue; and they were still so employed when a servant handed a letter

to Ts'êng, who, recognising from the envelope that it was from the magistrate, opened it with an expression of nervous anxiety. His trepidation, however, turned into pleasure, as he read as follows :—

"With great respect I beg to invite you to-morrow at noon to the still clear waters of immeasurable depth, to enjoy the delights of poetry and the wine-cup. As our galley shall glide through the crystal waves of the lake, we will watch the floating leaves strike her gentle sides ; and when we have exhausted our songs, and drained the cup of our delights, we will turn our prow towards the shore."

This invitation was one of those smiles of fortune which had a strangely exhilarating effect on Ts'êng's variable temperament, and he hurried off to his study in the highest spirits to accept it.

"Reverently," he wrote, "I return answer to your jade-like epistle. What can surpass the calm beauty of the lake by moonlight or the tragic aspect of its waves in storm and rain? Your honour having deigned to command my presence on your stately boat, I, as in duty bound, will seize whip to follow you. My paltry literary attainments you will, I fear, find infinitely deficient ; and I am much afraid that I shall weary you with my efforts to express in verse my admiration for the mountains and lake."

The day of the magistrate's picnic opened bright and fine, and with commendable punctuality Ts'êng and his fellow-guests assembled at the landing-place, to which usually dreary spot their silk and satin robes and highly coloured skull-caps gave an unwonted air of gaiety. The last to arrive was the

host, who, on dismounting from his sedan, bowed collectively and repeatedly to his friends, lifting his joined hands to his forehead as if in supplication, and then bending low in an attitude of humble adoration. His twelve guests returned his salutation with supple knees and effusive tokens of respect. These ceremonies accomplished, the whole party embarked on the barge. The vessel was one of the best of its kind, but was not a bark to brook a mighty sea. The two masts were innocent of sails, and were burdened only with flags, setting forth in large character the rank and titles of the magistrate. The forepart was decked over, and formed the abode night and day of the crew. Abaft this forecastle was an open space, extending to midships, where arose a large and luxuriously furnished deck-house. The window-frames were prettily painted and adorned with wood-carving, while at the portal were suspended painted-glass lanterns, from which hung fringes and tassels. Inside, chairs, tables, and a divan afforded abundant accommodation; and round the room were ranged stands on which stood rare and curiously trained plants in costly porcelain pots.

At the word *K'aich'uen* ("unmoor the ship"), given by the magistrate, the crew, with the help of a crowd of idlers on the wharf, launched the vessel into the deep. The island to which they were bound was about a mile from the shore, and thitherwards the crew, with that happy absence of all signs of hurry which belongs to us orientals, impelled the craft by slow and deliberate strokes of their long sweeping oars. On landing, the magistrate led the

way to a Buddhist temple which stood on a platform of rocks overlooking the lake. No more appropriate spot could possibly have been chosen for the occasion. The view over the still waters of the lake, dotted here and there with verdure-clad islets of every shape, was indescribably beautiful; and the temple, which in its arrangements and adornments resembled rather a temple of the god of pleasure than of the ascetic Buddha, supplied all that was necessary to minister to the wants of the magistrate and his friends.

With the help of the priests the feast was quickly spread, and with sharpened appetites the guests sat down to the excellent cheer provided for them. Merrily the wine went round, and under its influence Ts'êng's spirits, which had been encouraged by the marked attention shown him by the magistrate and Tso, rose considerably. Even the proposition, ingeniously made by Tso towards the end of the feast, that they should amuse themselves by verse-making, had only a slightly depressing effect upon him. At any other time the thought of having to submit extempore compositions to the criticism of twelve judges would have reduced him to trembling fear; but now, as the themes were given out, he seized his pencil and hazarded stanzas which, though they saved him from the accustomed penalty of drinking off three cups of wine, brought the magistrate rapidly round to Tso's estimate of his literary ability.

But the significant glances which were exchanged between the two observant friends were quite lost upon Ts'êng, who talked more and laughed louder

than anybody else; and finally, on their return, he made his adieux to his host and companions, and turned homewards flattered and self-satisfied. The night, for it was late, was fine and warm, and as he sauntered on his way, he recalled with pleasure the compliments which had been paid him and the smart things he had said. As he approached his house, however, these grateful cogitations were interrupted by the sound of angry voices, which, on advancing, he perceived were centred at his own doorway. His presence produced a momentary lull in the storm of angry abuse.

"What is all this about?" he demanded, rather for something to say than for the sake of information: for, as a matter of fact, the voices of the disputants had been so high that he was already fully aware of the cause of quarrel between two of his servants, Tan̂ and Le, and an old pedlar, who now stood breathless with passion before him.

"The matter, your honour! Why, this old rogue wants to cheat us out of a hundred cash for these two trumpery rice-bowls, the like of which we could buy anywhere for fifty!"

"May your words choke you, you idle, good-for-nothing vagabonds!" shouted the old man, trembling with anger, and shaking his fist at the speaker. "Eighty cash I gave for them at Su-chow; and after having carried them on my bamboo all these miles, am I to sell them to you for less than they cost me?"

At any other time Ts'êng would have avoided all participation in the quarrel, and would probably

have hastened to put himself beyond the reach of the angry voices. But the magistrate's wine was still potent in him, and he felt disposed to let his servants see that when he was so minded he could face even so formidable an adversary as an angry old pedlar.

"I cannot have you making such a disturbance at my door," he said, with a motion of the hand, which was meant to be haughty; "nor can I have my servants abused by a man like you. So be off, and take the price they offer you for the bowls."

But the waves of the old man's wrath were too high to be stilled by a word from Ts'êng, and he turned fiercely on that young gentleman—

"Who are you," he cried, "that you should tell me what to take and what to leave? Because you got a degree through your uncle's favouritism, you think yourself entitled to dictate to me, do you? Nay, don't pretend to be angry; you know what I say is true, and other people know it also. Did I not hear young Mr Liu charge you with it in the street of Longevity the other day? and did I not see you, instead of facing him, sneak away like a whipped cur?"

The greater the truth the more bitter the sting. The pedlar's words cut Ts'êng like a whip, and the anger which rose in his breast being supported by his borrowed courage, he seized the old man by the throat, and with a violent shove threw him backwards on the pathway. Having accomplished this heroic feat, he turned to his servants with an expression which said plainly, "See what I can do when I am really roused."

"THREW HIM BACKWARDS ON THE PATHWAY."—*Page* 42.

Catching his cue, the servants assumed attitudes of astonished admiration.

"Hai-yah," said one, "your honour's anger is more terrible than a lion's rage!"

"If he had only known the measure of your honour's courage," said the other, "he would have mounted a tiger's back rather than anger you."

Pleased and triumphant, Ts'êng turned to take another look at his fallen victim, when, to his horror and alarm, he saw him lying silent, motionless, and death-like on the spot where he had fallen. Instantly his assumed air of braggadocio left him, the blood fled from his flushed cheeks, and in the twinkling of an eye there passed through his mind a vision of himself branded as a murderer, carried before the magistrate, imprisoned, tortured, and beheaded. The vision, momentary though it was, was enough to rack his nervous temperament with fearful terrors; and forgetful of his former attitude, he threw himself on the ground by the prostrate pedlar, imploring him to rouse himself, and calling on his servants to help him raise the apparently lifeless man.

But the servants were nearly as unnerved as their master; and it was with great difficulty that the three men carried their victim into the doorkeeper's room. There Golden-lilies, who had been disturbed by the noise, found the three men helplessly gazing at the senseless form of the old man. Hastily sending one servant for cold water, and another for a fan, she took her place by the bedside, and having unfastened the pedlar's collar, turned to her husband to ask an explanation of the affair. As well as his

confused mind would let him, he told his story with tolerable accuracy. Only in one place did he kick over the traces of truth, and that was when he roundly asserted that he had not used violence towards the sufferer. "I merely," said he, "laid my hand upon his shoulder, and it was while starting back in a nervous tremor that his foot slipped on the pavement and down he fell." To the servants who had now returned Ts'êng appealed for confirmation of this statement, and received from them a warm verbal support of this very new story; alas! how different a one from that in which he had gloried but a few moments before!

Meanwhile Golden-lilies was sprinkling the old man's face with the water, and gently fanning him, in response to which judicious treatment he opened his eyes. At first his gaze was strange and wild, but presently he recognised those about him; and to Ts'êng's infinite relief, asked where he was, and what had happened. Returning consciousness gave life to his formerly death-like features, and the recognition of it produced a no less change in Ts'êng's countenance. The vision which had passed through his mind when he thought the old man was dead, had haunted him still, and no effort would prevent the pictures his imagination had conjured up from returning to his mental sight. Now he could thrust them on one side as a man throws off a nightmare; and in his delight he seized the awakened pedlar's hand, and would have shaken it wildly had not Golden-lilies warned him to do nothing of the kind. By degrees the old man recovered his recollection of

all that had passed; and when a cup of tea had still further revived him, Ts'êng led him to the divan in the reception-hall, while wine was warmed for his benefit. Again and again Ts'êng expressed his regret at the accident; and when the old man insisted on starting homewards, lest he should be too late for the ferry-boat across the lake, his host presented him, as a peace-offering, with two ounces of silver and a roll of silk, neatly packed away in one of Golden-lilies' baskets. When the door was closed on his guest, Ts'êng betook himself to Golden-lilies' apartments with an intense feeling of relief. His mind was incapable of perspective; and in all affairs of life the present loomed so large to his mental sight, that everything else was invisible. At this moment his escape from a great peril gave a nervous elasticity to his spirits which contrasted painfully with his abject dejection of a few hours before. Golden-lilies, rightly divining the frame of mind in which he was likely to be, had prepared for him a soothing repast of chicken's liver, sweetmeats, and *ginseng*, with a pot of some excellent Su-chow wine to wash them down. Though not hungry, Ts'êng was feverish and thirsty, and the quantity of wine he took was quite out of proportion to the quantity of viands he ate. However, Golden-lilies' end was attained. He was revived and strengthened, and she even did not object to his becoming somewhat excited. It was better than seeing him leaden-eyed and trembling. By degrees, under the influence of the wine, he began to explain away the slip which he had been so glad to invent to account for the

pedlar's fall, and was just describing the pot-valiant part he had played, when Tan hurriedly entered with the news that Lai, the ferryman, was outside, and insisted on seeing his honour at once. The man's face and manner were so perturbed that all the beneficial effects of Golden-lilies' feast vanished, and she turned to see her lord and master again pale and limp.

"What is the matter?" asked Ts'êng, as the ferryman, without waiting for an invitation, entered the room. This man was one of Ts'êng's many *bêtes-noires*. He was a rough, determined fellow, with a truculent face, and a no less truculent manner. He had, further, an unconcealed contempt for Ts'êng, and lost no opportunities of showing it. That this man, therefore, should be the bearer of what Ts'êng instinctively knew to be bad tidings, was an additional bitterness to the pill.

"I have brought you bad news, Mr Ts'êng, and thought I would just step in and tell you, before going on to the magistrate," added the man, ominously.

"What is your news?" said Ts'êng, in vain attempting to suppress his apprehensions.

"The old pedlar, Ting, whom you threw down on the pavement, is dead."

If the executioner's axe had at that moment descended on the neck of poor Ts'êng, he could not have looked more bereft of life than he did as he threw himself back in his chair at these words. For some seconds his power of speech failed him, and at last he gasped out—

"What do you mean? How did he die? Not that it matters to me," he added, with a violent effort to appear calm.

"He came down to my boat to cross the lake," said Lai, looking steadfastly on his victim, "and after we had gone a short way across he appeared to turn faint and giddy, and at last he tumbled off the seat into the bottom of the boat. As quickly as I could I put down my oars to help him up, when I saw it was something worse than a faint, and he had just time to tell me of the scuffle at your door, and that you had pushed him down and killed him, when he fell back dead."

"It is a lie," screamed Ts'êng; "when he left this house he was quite well."

"Well, all I know is," said Lai, "that he is now dead, and that when in the act of death he said you were his murderer. These are some things," he added, holding up Golden-lilies' basket with the roll of silk, "which he had in his hand when he came into the boat."

Ts'êng gazed at these evidences of the truth of the man's story with a fixed and glassy stare, while poor Golden-lilies stood by with her face in her hands weeping bitterly. In one short day all that had been pleasurable in their existence had been exchanged for blank despair. The morning had opened with bright hopes and brilliant expectations, and now the evening had set in with a black darkness of misery which crushed them to the ground. For some seconds not another word was uttered. But presently Golden-lilies went over to her husband, and taking his hand

in hers, whispered something in his ear, which brought a ray of intelligence into his face.

"Yes, you are right; I will try," he faltered.

"You and I have known one another a long time, Lai," he said, "and I am sure you would not do an injury to an old neighbour and friend. This is a bad business, and I swear to you I am not to blame. His foot slipped and he fell down. It will do you no good to tell any one about it; and if you will keep the secret, I will willingly pay you handsomely. Oh, promise me that you will," said the wretched man, throwing himself at Lai's feet.

"Here was a pretty position for a graduate and an expectant mandarin!"

Here was a pretty position for a graduate and an expectant mandarin! On his knees at the feet of a common fellow, who did not know one character from another, and who knew as much about Confucius as he did about the Book of Changes!

"Well, Mr Ts'êng," said Lai, "I don't want to do anything to injure you, but the man died in my

boat; so that unless I can explain his death, I shall be charged with the murder."

"Where is he?" gasped poor Ts'êng.

"In my boat," said Lai. "I have anchored it in a quiet place up the river, so that no one should go on board."

"Oh, if you will only keep the matter a secret," said Ts'êng, rising as his hopes rose, "I will give you any sum you ask."

"But what am I to do with the body?" hesitated Lai.

"You can bury it in my graveyard, which is, as you know, on the bank of the lake. The night is very dark, and the wall round the yard is high, so that no one will see you."

"But I cannot do it by myself."

"No; but I will send two of my servants with you. If you will only do this for me, I will be your slave for the rest of my life."

"Well," said Lai, after a few moments' apparent consideration, "if you will give me money enough to set up a fish-shop, I don't mind doing this job to oblige you."

"Gladly I will," said Ts'êng; "and now I will call the servants." So having summoned Tan and Le, he repeated to them the story told by Lai. With many appeals to their good feeling and sense of gratitude, he begged them to do him this service, promising that he would give them substantial rewards if they consented. After some hesitation and discussion, the men came to terms, and went off with the ferryman, armed with spades.

The three men stole out like conspirators into the street, and, following devious lanes and unfrequented ways, they reached the boat, snugly moored under the bank of the lake.

"Take care where you go," said Lai, as they stepped on board, "and just sit where you are while I get to the oars." The men, who were beginning to feel nervous and frightened, needed no second bidding; and after half an hour's pull, Lai, who knew the lake as well by night as by day, ran the boat ashore at Ts'êng's family graveyard.

"Now come here and help me with the old man," said he, as soon as he had secured the boat to the bank.

"Why, he is all wet," said Tan, as he helped to lift the body.

"I know," answered Lai; "he fell into the water when he turned giddy, and I had to pull him out."

"You did not say anything about that up at the house," said Tan.

"Well, I tell you now, and that is enough, is it not?" answered Lai, sullenly.

With considerable difficulty the three men groped their way into the graveyard bearing their ghastly burden, and at once set to work to dig a grave. Every now and then the sound of passing footsteps made them pause in their work; and once they were evidently heard, for through the darkness there came the challenge—"Who is that in Mr Ts'êng's graveyard?" But presently the challenger went on, and before long the dead body was safely laid to rest, and the soil beaten flat over it. So soon as the work was

done, the men made their way hastily to the boat, being glad enough to escape from the dark, silent, and ghostly cemetery. On their return they found Ts'êng anxiously awaiting them. Again and again he made them assure him that no one had seen them, and as often he made them swear that they would keep his secret faithfully. That night the two servants went to bed rich men, while Ts'êng retired to Golden-lilies' apartment to try to lose his consciousness of misery in sleep. But this was beyond his power; occasionally he dosed, but only to dream that the pedlar was standing in the street accusing him aloud of his murder, and then with a violent start and scream he awoke. Poor Golden-lilies fared very little better; and when morning dawned they both arose, weary and unrefreshed, to meet they knew not what, and to face their difficulties with the best courage they could muster.

The sight even of the two confederate servants was a torture to poor Ts'êng, who knew, or fancied he knew, that they were watching him to see how a murderer would behave himself, and were mentally speculating on what would happen if the secret they held in their possession ever became known. In the same way every incident which occurred bore reference in his imagination to the terrible event of the preceding evening. Even little Primrose's innocent questions of why he looked so pale, and why he would not come out with her into the garden as usual, were more than he could endure; and the child was promptly handed over to her nurse, who had orders to keep her quiet and at a distance. As to his being

able to eat any breakfast, that was quite out of the question; and if there had been any chance of his having an appetite for dinner, it was dissipated by a note he received from a neighbour, who wrote to say, that in passing the Ts'êng cemetery on the preceding night he had heard the sound of pickaxes and shovels, and that to his question of "Who was there?" he had failed to get a reply. The writer excused himself for not having gone into the graveyard, by pleading the lateness of the hour and the darkness of the night. But he "humbly ventured to recommend that Ts'êng should look into the matter."

With a look of indescribable misery, Ts'êng handed this letter to Golden-lilies, who throughout the morning, partly, possibly, because hers was not the head in danger, had shown a much bolder front to fortune than her lord and master had been able to do, but also, doubtless, because, though of the softer sex, she was made of sterner stuff.

"Sit down and answer the letter at once," she said, "and, while thanking him for his vigilance" ("Curse him for it," muttered Ts'êng), "say that you will send at once to make inquiries."

Ts'êng did as he was bid, and then relapsed into blank misery. Possibly he was under the delusion that remorse for having taken the life of a fellow-creature was the mainspring of his mental agony; but had he analysed his feelings carefully, he would have found that that feeling hardly entered at all into his cogitations. Blank fear it was that oppressed him; fear of being dragged off to prison as

a murderer—fear of having to face the magistrate who had so lately entertained him—fear of being tortured if he did not confess, and fear, if he did, of the executioner's fatal weapon. If he had been capable of diving into his inner feelings, he would have known that an assurance that his crime would never be discovered, had that been possible, would have lifted the whole weight from his over-burdened soul; but now, while at one moment in his terror he almost wished that it might be brought to light at once, that he might escape from his torturing suspense—at another, he tried to buoy himself up with the hope that it would never be found out. One thing he had determined to do, and that was, as soon as he had settled with Lai, who was to call after dusk, he would go himself to the graveyard to make quite sure that the work was well done. Much though he hated and feared the ferryman, he now had a morbid longing for his arrival; and when that worthy appeared, he received him with open arms.

Lai was as undemonstrative and self-possessed as Ts'êng was effusive and flurried; and a glance at that unfortunate young gentleman was enough to convince his visitor that he had the game in his hands.

"Well, Mr Ts'êng," he began, as he seated himself uninvited, "I have come according to arrangement to settle about last night's job."

"Yes, yes; don't say anything more about *that*," said Ts'êng, shuddering. "I have here two hundred taels of silver, which I hope you will accept from me."

"That is not enough," answered Lai; "do you think I would have buried a murdered man——"

"Oh don't, don't. Well, come, I will give you another fifty taels; surely that will satisfy you," said Ts'êng, who, though anxious to quiet Lai, had an intense dislike to parting with his money.

"Now, look here, Mr Ts'êng," said Lai deliberately, and with a threatening countenance, "if you don't give me down three hundred taels, good weight, I shall go on at once to the magistrate's to——"

"Say no more, you shall have the three hundred. And now, I have something to ask of you—I want you to row me up to the graveyard and show me where *it* is."

"Very well," replied Lai, "there will not be any one wanting to cross the lake to-night, so we can start now if you like."

"Is it dark enough?" asked Ts'êng.

"It is so dark that you might run into your best friend's arms without his knowing you; and unless you have the eyes of a cat or an owl, you won't see much when you get there."

With much caution the expedition was made, and Ts'êng satisfied himself, so far as the darkness would allow, that every care had been taken to make the newly made grave as much like the surrounding soil as possible. He returned, therefore, with his mind now at rest, and as days went by and nothing serious occurred to arouse his fears, he gradually recovered much of his ordinary placidity. Not that he altogether escaped annoyance; for Lai, luxuriating in his suddenly acquired wealth, showed a tendency to

break out into riot, and in his cups he allowed himself to talk of his friendship with "young Ts'êng" in a way which, coupled with his sudden wealth, made his neighbours wonder and gossip. From some of these Ts'êng learnt what was going on. The bare idea of his alliance with Lai becoming a subject of tittle-tattle was torture to him, and he took an

"With much caution the expedition was made."

opportunity of begging the ferryman to be more cautious. Being not unwilling to worry poor Ts'êng, Lai affected to be indifferent to anything people might say, and adopted altogether so defiant a tone, that he brought Ts'êng once again to his knees.

To add to Ts'êng's anxieties, little Primrose was

seized one evening with a violent headache and every symptom of high fever. For three days the child lay tossing to and fro with burning skin, parched mouth, and throbbing head; and when, at the end of that time, these symptoms abated, their origin was made plain by an eruption which was unmistakably that of smallpox. The doctor who was summoned felt the pulse of the sufferer and prescribed *ginseng*, and broth made of cassia shoots, in accordance with the dictum of the highest authorities. But to this orthodox treatment the disease declined to submit. The virulence of the distemper was unchecked; and though Golden-lilies paid numerous visits to the shrine of the Goddess of Smallpox, and spent large sums of money in the purchase of offerings to that deity, the child daily and hourly grew worse, until the doctor had unwillingly to acknowledge that he could do nothing more. It is difficult to say which of the parents during these dark days suffered the greatest mental agony. Golden-lilies' distress was that of an agonised mother, tortured by the fear of losing her only child; while Ts'êng's grief at the possible loss of his fondling, was aggravated by a superstitious belief that his own crime had brought this misery upon him. Even the doctor, accustomed as he was to displays of affection, was touched by the grief of the young couple, and, forgetful of all professional etiquette, he recommended Ts'êng, as a last hope, to send for a quack practitioner, residing at a town some twenty miles away, who had, he said, acquired a reputation for the successful treatment of similar desperate cases.

Eagerly catching at this straw, Ts'êng wrote a note begging the doctor "to deign to visit his reed hut, and to bend his omniscient mind to the case of his insignificant child," and bade Tan carry it at once to its destination. But since the night when Ts'êng had been obliged to place his secret in the hands of his two servants, their manner had been less respectful than formerly, and sometimes even defiant. To Tan the present mission was evidently distasteful; and it was only by the promise of a handsome reward that Ts'êng at last succeeded in getting him off. During the whole afternoon of that day, time seemed to the watchers to stand still; and towards night, when they hoped that the expected doctor might appear, every approaching horse's hoof brought hope, which as often was destined to be disappointed as the tramp died away again in the distance. Meanwhile Primrose grew worse and worse. As night came on unconsciousness set in; and just before dawn the little thing gave a deep sigh and passed into the land of shades.

Both Ts'êng and Golden-lilies were completely crushed by the ruin of all their hopes; and when Tan made his appearance towards noon, they scarcely heeded his explanation that he had waited all night at the doctor's house, expecting his return from a distant professional visit, and that, when morning came, he had thought it best to come back, even without the doctor, to report his want of success.

Much sympathy was felt with the sorrow-stricken parents at the loss of their only child, and many were the visits of condolence which Ts'êng received during

the ensuing days. Among others, a relation called, who, after having expressed his sympathy, added with evident reluctance—"There is a matter, my brother, about which I feel bound to speak to you, although I am most unwilling to trouble you about ordinary affairs at such a time as this."

"Please don't let my affliction interfere with any matter of business," said Ts'êng.

"Well, the fact is," said his guest, "that the other morning—it was, I remember, the morning when your little one departed for the 'Yellow Springs'—one of my servants came home very much the worse for wine and opium; and on my asking him for an explanation of his conduct, he said that a man of yours named Tan had kept him up all night drinking and smoking at an opium-tavern in the town. Can this be true?"

"It is quite impossible," replied Ts'êng; "for the whole of that night Tan was twenty miles away, at the house of a doctor to whom I had sent him."

"Well, I have brought my man," said the other, "that he may repeat his story in your presence, and that, if necessary, we should confront him with Tan."

"Let him come in, by all means," said Ts'êng.

In obedience to a summons Tan's accuser entered the room. He was a dissipated-looking fellow. His face was thin and drawn, and of that peculiar mahogany hue which is begotten by long-continued indulgence in the opium-pipe. From the same habit his teeth were blackened, and the whites of his eyes looked as though they had been smoke-dried. On entering he bowed his knee, and then proceeded to

give a circumstantial account of the night in question. At first Ts'êng had treated his accusations with contempt; but the remarkably coherent manner in which the man retailed his story, suggested doubts to his mind, which tortured him with misgivings. Without waiting for the conclusion of the man's statement, therefore, he summoned Tan to face his accuser. With a glance Tan took in the position of affairs, and having with a considerable effort mastered the uneasiness which the crisis provoked, he stood ready to brazen it out.

"This man tells me," said Ts'êng, "that instead of carrying my letter to the doctor the other evening, you passed the night drinking and smoking with him at a tavern in the town. Is this true or false?"

"It is false, your honour; and I can only suppose that this man, to whom I have only spoken once or twice in my life, must have invented this story out of spite, or in order to shield, in some way which I do not understand, his own conduct from blame."

"Are not you ashamed to tell such a lie in the sight of heaven?" said the man, quite taken aback by the coolness of the denial; "but fortunately I have some evidence of the truth of my story, which you will find it hard to meet. Did you deliver your master's letter to the doctor?"

"Certainly I did."

"That is curious; for I happen to have here a letter which I found on the floor of the room we occupied at the tavern, and which I strongly suspect is the letter you were intrusted with. Will you see for yourself, sir, whether this is your letter or not?" said

the man, handing to Ts'êng an unopened envelope, which he produced from his sleeve.

With a trembling hand Ts'êng took the letter, and at a glance recognised it as the one he had written with such eager haste, and with such a longing hope. The thought that but for the treachery of the wretch before him his little Primrose might have been still with him was more than he could bear. For a moment he fell back in his chair with quivering lips and cheeks as pale as death, and then as suddenly the blood rushed headlong through his veins, and with wild eyes and uttering savage curses he sprang from his chair and rushed upon Tan, who, accepting the turn things had taken, had fallen on his knees, and was performing the *kotow* with every token of humble submission.

With wild fury Ts'êng kicked at the bowing head of his follower, and might probably have been charged a second time with manslaughter, had not his guest dragged him by main force back to his chair and dismissed Tan from the room.

It was a long time before Ts'êng could recover his composure. His nerves were completely unstrung, and he trembled like a leaf. His friend, who was a determined fatalist, used every argument at his command to soothe his remorse and regrets. He pointed out that Heaven having doomed the death of little Primrose, nothing could have prevented it; that even if the doctor had come, he could not have lengthened out her life one moment beyond the time allowed her by the Fates; and that, therefore, though Tan's conduct had been infamous, it had not in any

way influenced the result. "I quite admit that the man deserves punishment for his disobedience, and I would suggest that you should now order him to be bambooed on the spot. It will satisfy justice, and will, at the same time, be a relief to your feelings."

"It will certainly be a relief to me to see the fiendish brute suffer," said Ts'êng, "and it shall be done at once." So saying, he directed three of his servants to seize Tan and to flog him in the court-yard. The men, who were evidently not unused to the kind of business, dragged the offender in and stretched him face downwards on the stones of the yard. One then sat on his shoulders, another on his ankles, while a third, being provided with half a split bamboo, prepared to inflict chastisement. At a signal from Ts'êng the concave side of the bamboo descended on the back of the thighs of the culprit with tremendous force and effect. The wretched man's frame quivered throughout, and as blow after blow fell he uttered cries for mercy, and bitter groans which would have appealed to the heart of any one whose feelings were not deadened by mental tortures. But Ts'êng, in his present unhinged frame of mind, had no mercy, and if a restraining hand had not been outstretched he would have allowed the wretched man to die under the lash. As it was, his friend interfered, and warned Ts'êng that the punishment was becoming excessive. To this remonstrance Ts'êng yielded, and the blows were stayed. But Tan, whose cries had gradually died away into silence, remained motionless, and unconscious of the mercy which had been

extended to him. Seeing his condition, the servants carried him off to his bed, where, under the influence of restoratives, he was by degrees brought back to life. But it was many days before he was able to move; and even then his weakness was so great, and his nerves so shattered, that he had the air of a man recovering from a long illness. If, however, Ts'êng had hoped that the punishment would have produced penitence, he was much mistaken. At the best of times Tan's temper was not good. He was by nature morose and revengeful, and a certain want of courage in his composition disposed him towards deceit. With regaining strength he brooded more and more over the treatment he had received, and he vowed a fierce vow that for every blow that had been inflicted on him he would exact a tenfold vengeance.

Meanwhile the anxiety, grief, and excitement of the last few days had reduced Ts'êng to the verge of illness, and his general debility added a new cause of anxiety to poor Golden-lilies' already overburdened bosom. So serious was his condition, that she persuaded him to pay a visit to his brother at Su-chow, for the sake of the change of scene and air. The remedy was exactly what he required; and after a fortnight's absence, he wrote to say that he was so much better that he should follow his letter at the interval of a day.

By this time Tan was able to walk, and so soon as he was assured of the date of his master's return, he absented himself from the house for the rest of the day. Towards evening he returned, and though his mood was exultant, he was strictly reticent as to his

"WHAT IS THE WARRANT FOR?"—"MURDER!"—*Page 62.*

doings while abroad. His fellow-servants were too busy to be inquisitive; and as his enfeebled condition still prevented him from serving, he was left to himself.

The next day, towards evening, as Ts'êng's chair turned into the road in which his house stood, two police-runners, who had been sitting on a doorstep opposite, rose and crossed over to Ts'êng's gateway. At the familiar shout of the chair-coolies, *Tung-chia lai-lo* ("The master has come"), the big folding-doors were thrown open, and the bearers were on the point of crossing the threshold, when one of the policemen advanced, and producing a warrant, ordered the coolies to stop and Ts'êng to dismount. Instinctively Ts'êng obeyed, and was for the first moment or two so dazed that he hardly seemed to be aware what was going on. By degrees the dress of the policeman, with his red-tasselled official cap and long robe, helped him to realise the situation, and he gasped out, "What is the warrant for?" "Murder," answered the man, as he laid his hand on Ts'êng's arm. It was fortunate for Ts'êng that he did so, for without some support he would have fallen prone to the ground. As it was, it was as much as the two men could do to support his tottering steps for a few yards, and then his legs refused to move, and his head fell forward on his chest as he dropped off into a dead faint. Seeing the condition of their master, the coolies brought forward his sedan, and the policemen accepting their aid, put the inanimate form of their prisoner into the chair, and directed the coolies to carry it to the prison at the district magistrate's

yamun. The distance was not great, and the coolies, anxious to save their master from additional shame, hurried fast through the streets. On arriving at the *yamun*, they entered the front gates, and were then directed by the policemen to turn off to the left through a door, the insignia of which, a painted tiger's head with huge staring eyes and widely opened jaws, marked it as the entrance to the prison. Passing through this they entered a narrow passage, at the end of which was a courtyard, where the coolies were ordered to put down their load. It had never been the fate of either of these two men to find themselves within a prison before; and the sights which met their eyes made them shudder to think what their master's feelings would be when he awoke to consciousness and found himself in such a place.

In the courtyard itself, groups of prisoners, bound with heavy chains, were huddled together, whose appearance was enough to carry horror and compassion to the minds of all but those case-hardened by habit. Their faces were thin and worn, and bore the cadaverous hue which is commonly begotten by want and foul air; while the listless expression of their eyes and the languid movements of their limbs furnished additional testimony to the state of weakness to which they had been reduced. The condition of their persons was filthy in the extreme. Skin-disease in every form was rife among them; and it was plain that a rich harvest was ripening for death within the walls of the jail. As the poor wretches crowded round the sedan-chair to see who could be the new arrival who came in such state,

the coolies instinctively drew back; and if the head jailer had not made his appearance at the moment, and with a sweeping blow and a curse driven his charges backwards, the still insensible Ts'êng would have been left in his chair. Scarcely less repulsive than the prisoners was the jailer, but for different reasons. There were no signs of want or ill health about him, nor was he dirtier than Chinamen of his class generally are, but a harder and more malignant face than his it is impossible to imagine. And that these outward signs were but the reflection of the savage cruelty of his character, was proved by the look of abject terror with which the prisoners regarded him. In a voice thick and grating, he ordered two of his myrmidons to manacle Ts'êng, and then to carry him into one of the cells which formed the eastern and western sides of the courtyard. Even from the outside these places looked more like wild-beast dens than the dwellings of human beings. The roofs were low, and a double row of strong wooden palisades, reaching from the ground to the eaves, guarded them in front. Into one of these dungeons, over whose portal was inscribed, as if in bitter mockery, the motto, "The misery of to-day may be the happiness of to-morrow," Ts'êng was carried. The coolies, determined to see the last of their master, followed him in. As they reached the door they recoiled as though a blast of a charnel-house had rushed out against them. Never were human senses assailed by an atmosphere more laden with pestilence and death. After a moment's hesitation, however, they mustered up courage to enter, and waited

just long enough to see their master laid on the raised wooden platform which extended along the side of the den. As they were not allowed to do anything for him, and as the turnkeys promised that he should be looked after, they escaped into the open air.

True to their word, and possibly in the hope of a reward, the turnkeys applied water to Ts'êng's face and head, and succeeded in reawakening life. At first he began to move restlessly and to moan piteously, and then opened his lack-lustre eyes. For a moment or two he saw nothing, but by degrees his power of conscious sight returned, and he looked wildly round the cell. His first impression was that he had passed into a land of eternal punishment, such as he had heard Buddhists speak of, and he shrieked aloud for mercy. The sight, however, of the policeman who had served the warrant on him, recalled to his recollection the circumstances of his arrest; and as his real condition dawned upon him, he sank back on the stage, overcome with horror and despair. How long he lay in this condition he knew not, but he was aroused from it by the entrance of the prisoners from the courtyard, who were being driven in for the night. Already the platform was full enough, but with these new arrivals the overcrowding became excessive; and as the weary wretches struggled with their little remaining strength for the places nearest to the grating, they jostled Ts'êng, and fought across him like wild beasts, adding a new horror to his misery. The atmosphere of the den became also even fouler than

before; and what with the heat and stench, Ts'êng began to feel feverish and ill. His head ached fiercely, his skin burnt, and his mouth was dry and parched. In his agony he called aloud for water; and though at first his cries were disregarded, his importunity prevailed with a prisoner less callous than the rest, who filled a tin mug from a tub which stood in the middle of the cell. The act of moving the water caused a fetid stench to rise from the slimy surface of the reservoir; and so foul were the contents of the mug, that, though burning with fever, Ts'êng could scarcely make up his mind to taste them. But thirsty men will swallow anything; and at last he drained the cup to its dregs, and even returned it to his benefactor with grateful thanks.

All night long he tossed about, burning with fever and tortured by delirium. His restlessness earned for him the anathemas of his fellow-prisoners, who, having been long inured to the foul atmosphere of the den, slept in comparative quiet. As daylight dawned the figures about him mixed themselves up with his delirious dreams, which, however, could add nothing to the horrors actually presented to his eye. Shocking as had been the aspect of his fellow-prisoners in the courtyard the day before, it was nothing to be compared to the condition of many of those whom weakness had prevented from groping their way into the outer air. One group of these were huddled together at the end of the platform, whose emaciated bodies and look of fierce agony told only too plainly that they were starving. One of their

number had already been released from his tortures by death; and the rats, more conscious of the fact than the jailers, were gnawing at the only fleshy parts of his skeleton-like form. A like fate was the only portal of escape left to those about him, and eagerly they desired to meet it. Ever and anon sleep relieved Ts'êng's eyes from the contemplation of these horrors, and then in his dreams, as though by a law of contraries, he wandered in the asphodel meadows of Elysium, surrounded by every object calculated to gratify the imagination and delight the senses. The transition from these visions to a perception of his actual surroundings was sharp and bitter. In moments of reason he sought for the means of escape from the terrors of his present cell. He knew enough of prisons to know that it was in the power of the turnkeys to mitigate the sufferings of their charges, and he knew that money was the key to open the door of their sympathies. He remembered that when arrested he had some ten or twelve ounces of silver in his pocket, and he made up his mind to try the effect of these on the turnkey when he should come to open the cell in the morning. At last that happy moment arrived. The man who had turned the key on him the night before now threw open the door, and Ts'êng, in company with most of his fellow-prisoners, crawled out into the fresher air of the courtyard. As the turnkey passed through the yard, Ts'êng accosted him, and in exchange for the contents of his purse, procured a breakfast which was the feast of an epicure compared to the fare dealt out to the common herd.

Meanwhile Golden-lilies' night had been scarcely more pleasantly spent than her husband's; and to her also had occurred the idea that it would be possible to buy with money the consideration of the jailers. While it was yet early, therefore, she collected all the available cash in the house, and set out in her sedan-chair for the prison. The head jailer received the announcement of her name with a cynical smile. He had expected that she would come, and knew well the object of her visit. Accustomed to such interviews, and to the readiest means of turning them to the best account, he at first assumed a hard and unrelaxing manner, and yielded only to Golden-lilies' entreaties when he had drained her resources. The upshot, however, of the visit was, that Ts'êng was summoned before the jailer, and was told that, in consideration of his being untried, he should be removed to another courtyard, "where," said the jailer, with something approaching a smile, "I hope you will be more comfortable than you probably were last night." In fulfilment of this concession, Ts'êng was led off to a neighbouring compound, which appeared almost clean and healthy in comparison with the one he had just left. The prisoners in it also were fewer in number, and though they were dirty and unshaven, they were evidently of a higher class than Ts'êng's late companions. They welcomed Ts'êng with some attempts at conversation, and performed various kindly offices for him, which, in his weak state of health, were more than he had either energy or strength to accomplish for himself. One man in particular, a stout, cheery-

looking son of Ham, was very kind and attentive; and as the day wore on, and they began to know more about one another, and the offences with which they were severally charged, this man did much to lighten the cares of all, and of Ts'êng in particular, to whom he seemed to have taken a liking. Of Ts'êng's prospects—"as I suppose," he said, "you are willing to be liberal with your money,"—he professed to take a hopeful view; while he did not conceal the fact that his own career would in all probability be quickly cut short.

"Instigating a rebellion is not a crime that finds mercy, even though it might be justified, as in my case, by the tyranny of the local mandarins."

"But if you are without hope, how can you possibly be as cheerful as you are?" said Ts'êng.

"Because I am a philosopher," said Lung—for that was his name; "because I have drunk deep at the fountain which inspired Lao-tsze, Chwang-tsze, and others, and have learnt with them the true value of life and the art of living and dying."

"The men you speak of were heretics," replied Ts'êng, "and went so far as even to speak disrespectfully of our great master Confucius. Nothing but disappointment must follow on faith in such as those."

"You boast yourself in Confucius, do you?" rejoined Lung. "I thought you did when you first came in, by your look of misery. Now tell me, how does he help you in your present difficulty? Which is in the best mental case—you who trust in the stereotyped phrases of that old formalist,

or I who follow the kindly lead of the Taoist philosophers? You look on the future life with terrified uncertainty; while I, regarding it in its true light, see in it but a continuance of existence in a new shape."

"These are all fallacies."

"Show me that they are."

"Did not Confucius say, in answer to Ke Lu's question about a future state, 'We do not know about life, and how, then, can we know about anything beyond the grave?' And if Confucius's intelligence stopped short with life, who can possibly hope to peer beyond it?"

"And are you really such a blind follower of the blind as that comes to? Has it never occurred to you to ask yourself whence you came and whither you are going? But I need not put the question to you, for if you had, you would never tremble so at the bare idea of stepping over the brink. To me, the knowledge that the executioner's sword will help me to return to the Great Mother of all things, from whence I came and to which, in common with all created things, I must return, is no unpleasing prospect. I have played my part on this stage. I have dreamed my earthly dream, with its fancies, its nightmares, and its moments of pleasurable excitement, and now I am ready and willing to pass into the loving arms of 'Abyss Mother.' Here we Taoists have the advantage over you Confucianists. You strut about, talking loudly over the relations between man and man, parents and children, and sovereigns and ministers—all good things in their

way—but you forget or close your eyes to the fact that existence does not end with what we call death. You limit your system to the short space of man's life upon earth, while we, overleaping all bounds of time, claim our right to immortality, and step with assurance into the grave."

"That is all very plausible," said Ts'êng, "but you have no evidence that there is any continuance of existence after death. No one has ever returned to life to give us his experiences, and your creed on this point must of necessity, therefore, be merely an assumption."

"Nay, it is more than that. Do we not see all around us that nothing in creation is ever absolutely destroyed? It suffers ceaseless change, but always exists. Look at the wood on a fire: it ceases to be wood after the flames have consumed it, but it reappears as smoke and ashes. Look at the leaves which strew the ground in autumn: decay transforms their shapes, but they do but change into mould, which again enters into the life of plants and trees,—and so created things go on for ever."

"That is a kind of reasoning that I don't understand," replied Ts'êng. "If you can produce any positive evidence that there is a future existence, I will believe it; but I cannot accept a faith which is based on an analogy of burnt wood and decayed leaves. And so to tell me to take comfort in the contemplation of a future state of happiness, is like telling a hungry man to satisfy his appetite by thinking of a feast, or a man shivering with cold to feel warm by imagining a roaring fire."

"So this is what it comes to; that Confucius serves as a guide through life when a man ought to be able to guide himself, and deserts you just at the moment when, in the face of death, you want some staff to support you, and some hand to lead you. But here comes the jailer, looking more like a demon than ever; he must have bad news for one of us."

At this moment the jailer entered with the list of those whose names had been marked with the vermilion pencil of the emperor for immediate execution, and turning to Lung, he told him, without any unnecessary verbiage, that his time had come. The seal thus set to the fate of his acquaintance was a severe shock to poor Ts'êng. His tongue refused to speak, and he durst not look on the face of the condemned man. But Lung was quite unmoved.

"You see," he said, addressing Ts'êng, "my race is run, and I only hope that if ever you should be in a like position, you may be enabled to face the future with the same composure that I do, and to place as sure a faith in the loving tenderness of the Great Mother of us all, as that which now supports me."

Ts'êng was too much overcome to utter a word, but wrung his friend's hands, and with weeping eyes watched him led off to be questioned by the judge before being borne to the execution-ground.

This event cast a gloom over the prison for the rest of the day; and the approach of night, even though it entailed a retreat into the close and fetid atmosphere of the cell, was a relief to all. The next morning, immediately after breakfast, the jailer paid another visit to the courtyard and summoned Ts'êng

to appear before the magistrate. The contrast between his last interview with his judge and the present occasion, covered Ts'êng with shame and remorse. As he entered the judgment-hall he scarcely ventured to lift his eyes to his former host, who was seated behind a large table covered with red cloth, attended by secretaries, interpreters, and turnkeys. He thought it just possible that when the magistrate recognised him he would pay him some consideration. But these hopes were rudely dispelled when two of the executioners, who stood at the foot of the dais, taking him by the arms, forced him on his knees. At the same moment, at a signal from the magistrate, one of the secretaries read out the accusation, in which he was charged with having murdered "a wandering pedlar, named Ting."

"Are you guilty of this charge, or not guilty?" asked the magistrate, in a cold, clear voice.

"Not guilty, your Excellency," said Ts'êng, vaguely hoping that his denial would be sufficient.

"Call the witnesses," said the magistrate; and to Ts'êng's horror, at a sign from the secretary, Tan stepped forward and fell on his knees.

"Now tell us what you know of this matter," said the magistrate.

Thus adjured, Tan told the whole story from beginning to end, and though he laid great stress on the pressure Ts'êng had put upon him to induce him to help to bury the body, he, on the whole, made his statement plainly and truthfully. Still Ts'êng thought it possible that, if no other evidence was produced, his word would be taken against his ser-

vant's,—at all events, the only answer that occurred to his confused mind was a flat denial.

"The whole story, your Excellency, is a lie from beginning to end," he said, "and is invented by this man out of spite, in consequence of my having had occasion to flog him for a gross falsehood and breach of trust." The confident manner in which Ts'êng made this uncompromising assertion, evidently produced a favourable effect on the magistrate, who, turning to Tan, asked—

"Have you any evidence of the truth of your story?"

"Well, your Excellency, I can show you where we buried the body, and where it is at this moment, if it has not been removed."

At these words Ts'êng, who felt the ground slipping from under him, trembled all over, and would have fallen forward had not a turnkey supported him on his knees. These signs of trepidation were not unmarked by the magistrate, who ordered two policemen to go with Tan to exhume the body, and directed Ts'êng in the meantime to stand on one side. So completely had his nerves now forsaken him, however, that to stand was impossible, and he was therefore allowed to sit huddled up against an angle in the wall at the side of the court. Here he suffered all the mental tortures to which weak and cowardly natures are susceptible. Shame, remorse, and anger all tortured him in turns, and dominating all was the abject terror which possessed him. The knowledge that he was completely in the power of others over whom he had not the slightest influence or control;

that he was alone without a single friend to whom to turn for advice or help; that he was guilty of the crime laid to his charge; and that death at the hand of the executioner would in all probability be his fate, —was an instrument which plagued him with such intensity, that it almost bereft him of reason. Rocking himself to and fro, and moaning piteously, he sat the very picture of misery. Other cases were called on and disposed of, but he heard not a word, and was only recalled to consciousness by being dragged once again into the courtyard, and put on his knees before the tribunal. He knew that this meant that Tan had returned, and he instinctively felt that the body of the murdered man was close beside him, but he durst not look round. Almost lifeless, he knelt waiting for the first words, which seemed as though they were never to be uttered. At last they came.

"Huddled up against an angle in the wall."

"Have you brought the body?"

"We have, your Excellency," answered Tan, "and here it is; we put it into this coffin as

it has been dead for some time; shall we open it?"

"Wait," said the magistrate, who was evidently anxious to avoid that operation if possible, and turning to Ts'êng, he asked, "Do you still deny your guilt?"

"No," replied Ts'êng, who had now lost all hope: "but I did not mean to kill him, it was an accident, indeed it was. Oh, have mercy on me," cried the wretched man, "and spare my life! Punish me in any way, but oh, let me live!"

"Your pitiable cries for mercy," said the magistrate, "only make your conduct worse. You had no compassion on the man you murdered and who now lies there in evidence against you, and I shall therefore have none on you. I sentence you——"

At this moment a sound of voices and a rush of persons were heard at the other end of the courtyard. The magistrate paused and looked up, prepared to inflict the bastinado on the intruders, but their appearance warned him that something unusual had happened. Golden-lilies led the van, and falling on her knees before the magistrate, cried—

"Spare him, spare him, your Excellency! it is all a mistake. Ting is not dead, but is here."

At the sound of Golden-lilies' voice, Ts'êng awoke from the trance into which he had fallen at the magistrate's rebuke, and turned his lack-lustre eyes upon his wife. Her eager look gave him confidence, and following the direction of her outstretched finger, he beheld the old pedlar on his knees. But he was

still too dazed to grasp the situation. Meanwhile Golden-lilies' volubility was unchecked.

"Ask him, your Excellency, and he will tell you he is the man; that the ferryman told a wicked lie; and that far from having been killed, he has not suffered the slightest inconvenience from his fall."

"But your husband has confessed that he murdered him," said the magistrate.

"The ferryman told him he had, and he believed him; but it was not true," urged Golden-lilies; "and just when I thought that the darkest hour of my life had come, when all hope of seeing my husband again alive seemed vanishing, who should knock at our door but the pedlar himself. Without waiting to hear his explanation, I have brought him with me; and now do let my husband go."

"Not so fast," said the magistrate. "I must first satisfy myself that this is Ting, and then I must inquire who that dead man yonder is, or rather was. Call Tan."

At this invocation Tan took up his former position on his knees; but in the interval since his last appearance he had lost confidence, and the turn events had taken did not, he saw clearly, reflect so brightly on his prospects as they did on Ts'êng's. He felt that he was compromised, though he could not understand it all, and was not quite sure how the magistrate would, on review, regard his conduct.

"Do you recognise that man?" asked the magistrate, pointing at Ting.

"Yes, your Excellency; he is Ting the pedlar, or his ghost."

"But in your evidence you charged your master with murdering Ting, and you swore that you buried him; and in support of your assertions you produce a body which is not Ting's, since Ting is here. How do you explain this?"

"All I can say, your Excellency, is, that my master ordered me to bury Ting; and Lai, the ferryman, told me that the man I buried was Ting."

"Arrest Lai and bring him before me at once," said the magistrate to a police-runner; "and meanwhile I will hear the pedlar's evidence. Bring him forward. Who are you?"

"My contemptible surname, your Excellency, is Ting, and my personal name is 'Heavenly Brightness.'"

"Tell me what you know of this matter."

"After leaving the house of his honour Ts'êng," said Ting, "I got into Lai's ferry-boat to cross the lake. On the way over I told him the story of the fracas at his honour's door, and showed him the silk which had been given me. He took a fancy to the pattern on it, and bought it from me, as well as the basket in which I carried it. Nothing else happened until just as we got to the other shore, when we saw the corpse of a man floating in the water. As I walked away from the shore I turned round and saw Lai rowing towards the body. I reached home the same evening and remained there until to-day, when I called at his honour's house. On showing myself at the door I was, to my surprise, hurried off here, and now I kneel in your Excellency's presence."

At this juncture Lai entered. The last few weeks' dissipation had not improved his appearance, and his ill-concealed terror at his present predicament added a ghastly paleness to his bleared and sallow complexion.

"How is this," said the magistrate, "that you have charged an innocent man with murder, and have palmed off on him the body of some one else as that of the man you said he had murdered?"

Seeing that circumstances were against him, Lai was silent.

"Now listen," said the magistrate: "you, Lai, are the principal culprit in this affair. You brought an unjust accusation against an innocent man, and by means of it extorted money from him. For these crimes I sentence you to receive a hundred blows with the large bamboo, and to be transported into Mongolia for five years. Because you, Tan, having connived at the concealment of what you believed to be a murder, charged your master with the murder out of a spirit of revenge, I sentence you to receive fifty blows on the mouth, and fifty blows with the large bamboo. And as to you, Ts'êng, though your conduct has been bad in attempting to conceal what you believed to be your crime, and in bribing others to silence, yet, in consideration of your imprisonment and of what you have gone through, I acquit you."

Never were more life-giving words uttered than those addressed by the magistrate to Ts'êng. Their effect was visible upon him physically; he seemed to grow in bulk under their gracious influence, and his

face reverted from the pallor of death to the colour of life.

"May your Excellency live for ever," said he, as he *kotowed* before his judge, who, however, had left the judgment-seat before he had completed his nine prostrations. As the magistrate turned away from the hall, he met Mr Tso, who had come to call upon him.

"So our friend Ts'êng has got off, I see," said his visitor.

"Yes," said the magistrate, "but I have quite come round to your estimate of his character. He is a poor creature. I sent a much finer fellow to the execution-ground yesterday."

"*Marked it as the entrance to the prison.*"—Page 64

THE TWINS.

FROM THE CHINESE OF WU MING.

THE saying commonly attributed to Mencius, that "Marriages are made in heaven," is one of those maxims which unfortunately find their chief support in the host of exceptions which exist to the truth which they lay down. Not to go further for an instance than the Street of Longevity, in our notable town of King-chow, there is the case of Mr and Mrs Ma, whose open and declared animosity to each other would certainly suggest that the mystic invisible red cords with which Fate in their infancy bound their ankles together, were twined in another and far less genial locality than Mencius dreamed of.

With the exception of success in money-making, fortune has undoubtedly withheld its choicest gifts from this quarrelsome couple. The go-between who arranged their marriage spoke smooth things to Ma of his future wife, and described her as being as amiable as she was beautiful, or, to use her own words, "as pliant as a willow, and as beautiful as a gem;" while to the lady she upheld Ma as a paragon of learning, and as a possessor of all the virtues. Here, then, there seemed to be the making of a very pretty couple; but their neighbours, as I have been often told, were not long in finding out that harmony was a rare visitant in the household. The daily wear and tear of life soon made it manifest that there was as little of the willow as of the gem about Mrs Ma, whose coarse features, imperious temper, and nagging tongue made her anything but an agreeable companion; while a hasty and irascible temper made Ma the constant provoker as well as the victim of her ill-humours.

By a freak of destiny the softening influences of the presence of a son has been denied them; but *en revanche* they have been blessed with a pair of the most lovely twin daughters, who, like pearls in an oyster-shell, or jewels in the heads of toads, have grown up amid their sordid surroundings free from every contamination of evil. They are beyond question the most beautiful girls I have ever seen. In figure they are both tall and finely shaped, with plastic waists and gracefully bending forms. In feature—for both Daffodil and Convolvulus, as they are called, are so exactly alike, that in describing one

I describe both—they are lovely, having eyebrows like half-moons, eyes which are so lustrous that one would expect them to shine in darkness, lips of the most perfect vermilion, finely shaped noses, and softly modelled cheeks. In fact, they are more like children of the gods than the daughters of men; and from all I have ever heard of them, their tempers and dispositions are counterparts of their outward appearance. All these charms of mind and of person were, however, quite lost upon their sordid mother, who until lately regarded them as though they were of the same mould as herself. So much so, that when they reached the prescribed marriageable age, instead of proposing to seek the empire for two incomparables to pair with such matchless beauties, she announced to her husband, in her usual brusque and overbearing manner, that she intended to look out for two rich young shopkeepers as husbands for "the girls." The moment she chose for making this announcement was not happily timed. She had already succeeded in ruffling Ma once or twice in the earlier part of the day, so that when she now blurted out her intention his colour rose with more than usual rapidity in his commonly sallow cheeks, and he replied angrily—

"I forbid your doing anything of the kind. You have no business to meddle with matters which don't pertain to you. Your duty in life is to obey me, and to do nothing without my instructions."

"Hai-yah! If I did that," said Mrs Ma, now thoroughly aroused, "the household would soon come to a pretty pass. What do you know about manag-

ing matters? You remind me of the owl which made itself look like a fool by trying to sing like a nightingale!"

"You ignorant woman!" replied her husband; "how dare you bandy words with me! Don't you know that Confucius has laid it down as an imperishable law that a woman before her marriage should obey her father, and after her marriage her husband?"

"And do you know so little of the Book of Rites," said Mrs Ma, nothing abashed, "as not to be aware that the mother should arrange the marriages of her daughters? So just you leave this matter to me. If you want to be doing something, open your chemist's shop again. What will it matter if you do poison a few more people by dispensing the wrong drugs?"

"You infamous creature! how dare you utter such slanders! If you ever again venture on such unparalleled insolence, I will divorce you! for remember that one of the seven grounds for divorce is violence of language. And how would you like to be turned adrift into the cold world at your age, and with your anything but pleasing appearance?"

This last shot told, and Mrs Ma flung herself out of the room without a word, contenting herself with expressing her anger and defiance by banging the door furiously after her. No sooner was the door shut than Ma took paper and pencil and wrote to invite his friend Ting "to direct his jewelled chariot to the mean abode of the writer, who was preparing a paltry repast for his entertainment." Ting was one of Ma's oldest friends, and, being linked to a wife of

a harridanish temperament, had a common bond of union with him. Like Ma also, he was secretly afraid of his better half, and his counsel, therefore, on the several occasions of domestic dispute on which he had been consulted, had naturally tended rather towards artifice than open war. Ma's note at once suggested to Ting a family disagreement, and he lost no time in obeying the summons, being always glad to find fresh evidences that others were as evilly circumstanced as himself. He was a tall, stout man, with a loud voice, but wanting that steadiness of eye which should match those outward seemings. By many people he was credited with a firm and somewhat overbearing character; but his wife probably showed more discernment when on one occasion, after a shrill outburst, she reminded him that "an empty pot makes the greatest noise."

As Ting entered Ma's room the two friends greeted one another cordially, and into the sympathetic ear of his guest Ma poured the story of his griefs.

"And now, what do you advise me to do?" asked the host. "My insignificant daughters have arrived at a marriageable age, and though they profess an aversion to matrimony and a contempt for the young men of this place, I consider it my duty to settle them in life. But I see clearly that if I am to do it at all, I alone must be the doer. My wife's views are so invariably opposed to mine, that it is hopeless to attempt to act in harmony with her."

"Well," replied Ting, "I myself always act on the principle of the proverb, 'What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve after.' I have on sev-

eral occasions made family arrangements without letting my wife into the secret until the time for interference has passed, and then, of course, she has been compelled to accept the inevitable. It is true the artifice has resulted in very unpleasant outbursts of wrath; but that is nothing—nothing, my dear Ma." Here Ting's voice, in spite of his brave words, trembled, as a recollection of certain domestic scenes came back to his memory. "Besides, I have in this way succeeded in asserting my position as master of my own household. And my advice to you in your present circumstances is that you should do likewise. If you have made up your mind to marry your daughters, employ a go-between to look out fitting partners, and make the necessary arrangements without saying anything to your wife about it. Then, when the presents have been sent and the cards exchanged, she will find it as easy to dam up the river with her pocket-handkerchief as to bar their marriages."

"Excellent! excellent!" said Ma; "I will act upon your advice. But I must be very circumspect, Ting, very circumspect; for Mrs Ma has a number of old cronies about her, who gather gossip from stone walls, rumours from the wind, and scandal from everything."

"Perhaps then it would be as well," replied Ting, rising to take his leave, "if you were to make use of my study for seeing the go-between and others whom you may wish to employ in the affair. It is quite at your disposal."

"Ten thousand thanks," said Ma. "Your advice

has made a man of me, Ting, and your kindness has carved for itself a place in my heart in which it will be for ever enshrined."

Meanwhile Mrs Ma, although for the moment discomfited, was by no means inclined to give up the struggle. After a short communing with herself she sent for Daffodil and Convolvulus, and announced to them her intention of forthwith providing them with husbands of their own rank in life, directing them at

"But, mother, we do not wish to marry."

the same time to preserve absolute silence on the subject to all but old "Golden-lilies," their maid and chaperon.

"But, mother, we do not wish to marry," said Convolvulus; "least of all to be tied for life to the sort of young man whom you are kind enough to contemplate for us. Why should we not remain as we are?"

"You are too young to understand such matters." replied Mrs Ma. "I have seen mischief enough arise from leaving young girls unmarried, and I am determined that you shall not be exposed to any such danger. Besides, I have been so bothered lately by suitors, who, it seems, have heard of your beauty, that I shall have no peace until you are settled."

"Remember, mother," put in Daffodil, "that as you have no sons, you and father are dependent on us to tend and wait upon you. Then, mother, we are so perfectly happy in each other's society that we need no other companionship, and it would break our hearts to be separated from each other and from you."

"I am touched by your expressions of affection, my children," answered their mother; "but my mind is quite made up, as I have just told your father, who is foolish enough to think, poor man, that he ought to have the management of the business. And now go back to your embroideries, and remember what I have said to you about keeping the matter secret."

Mrs Ma's announcement, although not altogether unexpected, fell with a heavy blow upon the twins, who had other and deeper reasons than those they had expressed for disliking the idea of having husbands of their mother's choice forced upon them. Women seldom, if ever, in the first instance give their real reasons, at least in China. Their habit is to fence them round with a succession of outworks, in the shape of plausible excuses, which, if strong enough to resist the questioner, preserve inviolate their secret motives. If, however, they are driven

by persistence out of the first line of defence, they retreat to the second, and so on, until the citadel is reached, when they are commonly obliged to yield, though even then they generally manage to march out with all the honours of war. In this case Mrs Ma had no motive for breaking the fence of the twins, and so never learnt, as she might otherwise have possibly done, that though the garden wall was high, it was not too hard to climb, and that often when she fancied her daughters were engaged at their embroideries, or practising their guitars, they were flirting merrily in the garden with the two young scholars, under the chaperonage of "Golden-lilies," to whom recollection brought a fellow-feeling for such escapades, and who always carefully watched over her charges, though at a judicious distance. These two youths, Messrs Tsin and Te, presented the real obstacles to the adoption of Mrs Ma's proposals by the twins. And it was at least evidence of the good taste of the young ladies that they preferred them to the young men of the shopkeeper class, among whom their mother thought to find them husbands. It was true that neither Tsin nor Te had at that time much of this world's goods, nor did there appear any immediate prospect of their being able to marry; for their fathers, who were ex-officials, were unendowed with anything beyond the savings they had accumulated during their terms of office, and these were not more than enough to enable them to end their days in retired comfort.

In these circumstances the ambitions of the young men centred in their chance of winning official rank

at the examinations. Of Tsin's success no one who had sounded the depth of his scholarship had any doubt. Te, however, was by no means so gifted. His essays were dull reading, and his odes were wooden things, painfully elaborated in accordance with purely mechanical rules. He had none of the facility with which Tsin struck off a copy of verses, and could no more have penned the lines to Daffodil's eyebrows, which first attracted the attention of the sisters to the young scholars, than he could have flown. It was on the occasion of the Feast of Lanterns at the beginning of this year, that Tsin and Te first became aware of the existence of the twins, who, under the charge of Golden-lilies, were on the evening of that festival admiring the illuminations in the streets. Struck by the incomparable beauty of the young ladies, the youths followed them about in blank amazement, until Tsin's imagination having been suddenly fired by seeing an expression of delight pass over Daffodil's beaming countenance at the sight of an illumination more brilliant than usual, he hurriedly penned a stanza, in which the ideas of willow-leaf eyebrows and jade-like features were so skilfully handled, that when it fell into that young lady's hands she was lost in admiration at the grace and beauty of the lines. A hurried glance of acknowledgment was enough to keep the young men at the heels of the twins until the portals of the ex-chemist closed upon them; and when, on the next afternoon, Convolvulus found in the summer-house a stanza marked by all the grace of diction which characterised the ode of the previous day, she had no hesita-

tion in ascribing the authorship to the same gifted being. This message of homage was a prelude to a hurried visit paid and received beneath the bunches of wistaria which hung around the favourite garden retreat of the twins, and this again to other and longer interviews, in which Tsin gradually came to devote himself to Daffodil, and Te to Convolvulus.

It was while toying at one such meeting that the twins were summoned to hear the designs which their mother had formed for their future; and when they left the maternal presence, it was with feelings akin to despair that they poured their griefs into Golden-lilies' sympathetic bosom. "What are we to do?" was their plaintive cry.

"Do?" said Golden-lilies cheerily—"why, do as the juggler did who was sentenced to death last year."

"You have always some wise saying or queer story ready, dear Golden-lilies. But explain; what did the juggler do except die?"

"That is just what he did not do, for when the Emperor told him that his life should be spared on condition that he made the Emperor's favourite mule speak, the man undertook to do it within twelve months by the calendar."

"What a fool he must have been!"

"So his friends said; but he replied, 'Not so, for many things may happen in a year: the mule may die, or the Emperor may die, or I may die; and even if the worst comes to the worst, and none of these things happen, I shall at least have had another year of life.' Now, though you are not in such a parlous

state as the juggler was, yet, as you cannot resist your mother, you had better appear to submit, and trust to the chapter of accidents."

But Mrs Ma was evidently disposed to leave as little as possible to accident, for the very next morning she sallied out in her sedan-chair, and paid a visit to a well-known "go-between" in the town. This woman, delighted to have the credit of arranging the marriage of the beautiful twins, chose from her list of bachelors two young men, one the son of a silk-mercer and the other of a salt-merchant, who fulfilled Mrs Ma's main requirement of being rich.

"They are nice young men, too," she added, "though neither of them is likely to attract the admiration of the goddess of the North Star like the matchless Chang-le. But if ugly men never mated, the imperial race of China would soon die out."

"I don't care a melon-seed," said Mrs Ma, as she ate two or three of those delicacies from the dainty dish by her side, "about beauty in a man. None can be called deformed but the poor: money is beauty, and to my mind the true deformity is an empty purse. So please make the proper overtures at once, and let me know the result. I have reasons for wishing to preserve secrecy in this matter, and I would therefore beg you not to talk of it until all is arranged."

It was not long before the go-between reported confidentially that her proposal had been received both by the silk-mercer Yang and the salt-merchant Le on behalf of their sons with enthusiasm. Nor did

the fortune-teller throw any obstacles in the way of the speedy fulfilment of Mrs Ma's schemes; for the almanac pointed with unmistakable clearness to the next full moon as being one of the most fortunate in the whole year for marriages.

Everything seemed therefore to lie level with the wish of Mrs Ma; and under the combined influences of good fortune and satisfaction evoked from the conviction that she was doing her duty as a mother, her good-nature knew no bounds. She was even civil to Ma, and in her superior way smiled to herself at the beaming self-content which had lately come over him, and which she naturally regarded as a reflection of her own good-humour. As the day for receiving the presents approached, she chuckled to see how easily he was persuaded to have the chairs and divan in the reception-hall re-covered and the walls redecorated. On the day itself—poor foolish man!—far from expressing any surprise at the superlative toilet in which she had bedecked herself, he paid her the compliment of likening her to a fairy from the palace of the "Royal Mother of the West," and even went the length, as though following her example, of arraying himself in his costliest garments. As the day advanced, the actions of each seemed to have a strange fascination for the other; and when, at the usual evening hour for the presentation of betrothal presents, the merry strains of the "Dragon and the Phœnix," played by more than one band, struck upon their ears, they glanced at one another with gratified curiosity rather than surprise. As the noise in the street swelled into a roar compounded of

"THE MERRY STRAINS OF THE 'DRAGON AND THE PHŒNIX' PLAYED BY MORE THAN ONE BAND."—*Page* 94.

bands, drums, and the shouts of coolies, Mrs Ma's pride rose at the thought that she had succeeded in capturing such liberal and munificent suitors, and she had almost forgotten the opposition of her husband when four young men, bearing letters, and each leading a goose and a gander—the recognised emblems of conjugal affection—followed by servants carrying a succession of rich presents, advanced to the audience hall. That her two *protégés* should have sent eight geese appeared to her unnecessary, although she accepted the multiplication of the birds as a pretty token of the ardour of the lovers; but her sense of this excess was soon lost in her admiration of the unusually numerous gifts which now filled the courtyard.

With many deep reverences the young men presented their letters to Ma, who was at first too much dazed by the confusion which reigned about him to do more than to incline his head and open the envelopes. As he read the first letter, however, his confused expression of countenance was exchanged for one of puzzled surprise.

"There is," he said, "some mistake here. I know nothing of this Mr Yang who writes. You must," he added, turning to the young man who had presented the letter, "have come to the wrong house by mistake."

"Pardon me," replied the young gentleman, "your humble servitor has made no mistake, unless, indeed, you are not the honourable father of the incomparable twins whom you have deigned to betroth to my principal, Mr Yang, and his friend, Mr Le."

The mention of these names recalled Mrs Ma to the actualities of the position; and, advancing towards her husband, she said with some embarrassment—

"There is no mistake in the matter. I told you that I should arrange our daughters' marriages, and I have done so. Messrs Yang and Le are the gentlemen I have chosen, and these are their presents in due form."

For a moment Ma looked at her in angry astonishment, and then, as the whole affair took shape in his mind, he lost all control over himself, and, trembling with passion, he broke out—

"You stupid, obstinate woman, how dare you disobey my orders and practise this deceit upon me? By what pretence of right have you ventured to interfere in this matter? You have brought disgrace upon me and infamy upon yourself. *I* have arranged alliances for the twins with the sons of my friends Messrs Tsai and Fung, and it is these they shall marry and no others!" Then turning to Yang's and Le's young squires, he added with scant courtesy—"Take away your gifts, young men, and tell your principals that this rebuff serves them right for dealing in an underhand way with a headstrong woman."

"Don't listen to him," cried Mrs Ma. "I accept your presents."

"Take them away!" shouted Ma.

"You shameless boor!" screamed Mrs Ma—"you miserable, vapouring, good-for-nothing! Do you talk to me of 'daring' and 'venturing'? Why, you

may thank Buddha that you have got a wife who knows how and when to act; and I tell you that your friends Tsai and Fung may as well try to join the hare in the moon as hope to raise the veils of my daughters. So if these young men represent them they had better be off at once and take their rubbish with them."

This was more than Ma's irascible nature was able to endure, and raising his hand to strike, he rushed

"Mrs Ma stood ready for the assault."

at his wife. Fortunately his servants were near enough to intervene, and an exchange of blows—for Mrs Ma had seized a flute from an amazed musician, and stood ready for the assault—was for the moment averted. Foiled in finding the natural outlet for his rage, Ma, with as wild gesticulations as were possible with a man holding each arm and a third dragging at his skirts, shouted orders to his servants to turn

Yang's and Le's squires, with their presents, out into the street. With equal vehemence Mrs Ma invoked the direst misfortunes and deepest curses on the head of any one who ventured to lay hands on them, and at the same time called on her partisans to throw the other people and their gifts out of doors. The hubbub thus created was aggravated by the incursion of idlers from the street, some of whom presently took sides, as the squires and their followers showed signs of acting on the taunts and adjurations of Ma and his wife. From words the adverse hosts speedily came to blows, and a scene of indescribable confusion ensued. The presents, which had made such a goodly show but a few minutes before, were broken to pieces and scattered over the courtyard; while the eight geese, with outstretched wings and wild cacklings, flew, seeking places of refuge. With impartial wisdom the servants of the house, aided by some unbiassed onlookers, threw their weight on the combatants in the direction of the door. By this manœuvre the courtyard was gradually cleared, and eventually the front gates were closed on the surging, fighting crowd, which was dispersed only when some few of the ringleaders had been carried off to the magistrate's *yamun*.

As a neighbour and an acquaintance of Ma, I thought it best, on being informed of what had taken place, to call in to see if I could be of any use. I had some difficulty in getting inside the front gates; but when I did, a scene of confusion presented itself such as I have never seen equalled. The courtyard was covered with *débris*, as though some typhoon

had been creating havoc in an upholsterer's shop; while in the audience-hall Ma was inflicting chastisement on his wife with a mulberry-twig, which he had evidently torn from the tree at hand in the yard. I was fortunately in time to prevent the punishment becoming severe, though at the time I could not but feel that Mrs Ma's conduct was of a kind which could only be adequately punished by corporal chastisement.

As a husband and a Confucianist, I deprecate the use of the rod towards a wife except in extreme cases. There are, however, some women whose intellects are so small and their obstinacy so great that reasoning is thrown away upon them. They have nothing to which one can appeal by argument; and with such persons bodily fear is the only fulcrum on which it is possible to rest a lever to move them. From all I hear, Mrs Ma is a typical specimen of this class. She prides herself on her obstinacy, which she regards as a token of a strong mind, and she is utterly destitute of that intelligence which should make her aware of the misery and discomfort it causes to those about her. No camel is more obstinate and no donkey more stupid than she.

But while quite recognising this, I could not but feel some compassion for her, as, weeping and dishevelled, she escaped from the hall when I succeeded in releasing her from her husband's wrath. At first Ma's fury was so uncontrollable that I could do nothing with him; but gradually he quieted down, and, acting on my advice, went over to his friend Ting to consult as to what should be done in the very unpleasant circumstances in which he was placed. It was plain

that some decided step would have to be taken, as the arrest of some of the rioters had brought the whole affair within the cognisance of the mandarins, and it is always best in such matters to be the one to throw the first stone. After much discussion it was, as I afterwards learned, decided that Ma should present a petition to the prefect, praying him, in the interest of marital authority and social order, to command the fulfilment of the contract entered into by the petitioner with Fung and Tsai.

On the following morning Ma, in pursuance of this arrangement, presented himself at the prefect's *yamun*, and, after having paid handsome *douceurs* to the doorkeeper and secretary, was admitted into the august presence of his Excellency Lo. Having only lately arrived in the prefecture, Lo's appearance had been hitherto unknown to Ma, who was much awed and impressed by the dignified airs and grand ways of his Excellency. A man severe he is and stern to view, and yet beneath his outward seeming there is a strong undercurrent of human nature, held in check, it is true, by the paralysing effect of our educational system, but still capable of being aroused and worked upon at times. As Ma knelt before him he glanced down the memorial, and demanded a full explanation of the circumstances. Nothing loath, Ma poured forth his version of the story, in which he by no means extenuated his wife's conduct, and wound up by emphasising the importance of checking the insubordination of the women, which was becoming only too prevalent in that neighbourhood.

"You certainly have made out a *primâ facie* case

for further investigation," said the prefect; "and what you say about women is, to your credit, precisely in accord with the teachings of Confucius, who laid down that 'women should yield absolute obedience to their husbands, and that beyond the threshold of their apartments they should not be known either for good or for evil.' I shall therefore summon your wife to appear at once before me; and meanwhile you may stand aside."

The summoning officer was not long in executing his mission, and the time had scarcely begun to hang heavily on Ma's hands when Mrs Ma entered the *yamun*. That lady looked anything but comfortable when she saw her husband talking with an assured air to the officers of the court, and answered his glance of recognition with the kind of look that a house-dog gives a stranger cur when it crosses his threshold. On learning that Mrs Ma had arrived, the prefect at once took his place on the bench; and as both disputants fell on their knees in the court-yard, he ordered Mrs Ma to explain her conduct in disobeying the commands of her husband.

"May it please your Excellency," she began, "I am a poor ignorant woman."

"So far I am with you," said the prefect; "but go on with your story."

"And, your Excellency, I have always tried to do my duty by my husband and children."

"That is not the point. Tell me why, when your husband had forbidden you to interfere in the matter of the marriage of your daughters, you persisted in doing so."

"May it please your Excellency, my great-grandmother——"

"Oh, may curses rest on your great-grandmother!" shouted the prefect, losing patience. "Speak to the matter in hand or you shall be flogged."

"I was only going to explain, your Excellency."

"Now take care what you are saying."

"It is true my husband told me that he would arrange our daughters' marriages, but I knew that anything he touched he marred, and I thought, therefore, that as I had always been told, at least by my great——" A warning glance from the prefect here checked her eloquence, and she went on—"I have always learned that the marriage of a daughter is the particular province of her mother. I should never have dreamed, your Excellency, of interfering if it had been our son's marriage. Not that we have a son, your Excellency, though many is the time I have been to the temple of Kwanyin to pray for one; and as to money, your Excellency——"

"Bring a one-inch bamboo," said the prefect to one of the lictors.

"Oh, please spare me, your Excellency, and I will say anything you wish!"

"All I want is that you should tell the truth and speak only the record. Do this, and I will listen; lie or wander, and I shall flog you."

"Well then, your Excellency, I found also that the two young men selected by my husband were in no way proper matches for my daughters, who are very beautiful. One of these wretched youths is blind in one eye, and the other has one leg shorter than its

fellow. In these circumstances I took the matter in hand, and discovered two veritable dragons, who were yearning to link their fate with the pair of phœnixes who rest beneath my humble roof. As destiny decreed, my husband's cripples sent their betrothal presents at the same moment that Messrs Yang and Le sent theirs. Upon this my husband gave way to wild fury, broke the presents to atoms, beat the servants, and flogged your humble servant until she was one mass of bruises."

"Is it true that these *protégés* of yours are as your wife describes them?" asked the prefect of Ma.

"No, your Excellency; she has grossly exaggerated their defects. It is true that the sight of one of Fung's eyes is partially affected, and that Tsai's legs are not quite of an equal length, but the difference between them is so slight that it is outwardly invisible, and is only perceptible if he walks over a wooden floor, when there is a slightly hop-and-go-one sound about his steps. But, your Excellency, she would have been wise to have remembered the proverb, 'Don't laugh at your neighbour's wart when your own throat is disfigured by a wen;' for it is as well known as that your Excellency is the quintessence of wisdom, that Yang is only, as we people say, nine parts of a whole; and as for young Le, he bears so evil a reputation that no respectable citizen will allow him to enter his doors."

"Well, if this were a matter which only concerned you two, I should not trouble myself further about it, for you are a pair of the simplest of simpletons; but as your daughters' interests are at stake, I have

thought it right to send for them, that I may find out what they feel on the subject."

At this moment the twins entered the court, and advanced with graceful modesty, swaying from side to side like tender shrubs gently moved by a passing breeze. Never had they looked more lovely; their jade-like complexions, exquisite features, and lustrous eyes lent so ethereal a beauty to their budding womanhood that they seemed more than mortal. With the winsomest mien, and wielding their fans as only Chinese women can, they bowed low before the prefect, and then stood awaiting his orders. The poor man gazed on them as a man gazes on spirits from the other world. He had looked up as they entered, expecting to see in them repetitions of their vulgar-looking parents; but to his unutterable surprise they stood before him resplendent as the moon on the fourteenth night, and as fascinating as fairies. As it happened, they had just arrayed themselves in their most becoming costumes in expectation of a visit from Tsin and Te, when the prefect's summons came. Every charm, therefore, which personal adornment could add to their natural beauty was present with them, and the picture they made as they stood in the middle of the courtyard was one which struck the spectators dumb with astonishment. The prefect dropped his pencil, and seemed quite to forget that anything was expected of him; and for the moment no one, except the twins and their parents, did expect anything from him; for one and all—secretaries, *ting-chais*, lictors, and clerks —were so ravished by the sight, that all conscious-

ness of the fitness of things was lost to view. After some moments of silence, which seemed to the twins like so many hours, the prefect awoke from his rapt astonishment, and said—

"Are you really the daughters of these people before me? Is it possible that nature should have played such a trick, and should have moulded you in manners as in shape, in blood and in virtue, on a model as widely separated from your parents as earth is from heaven?"

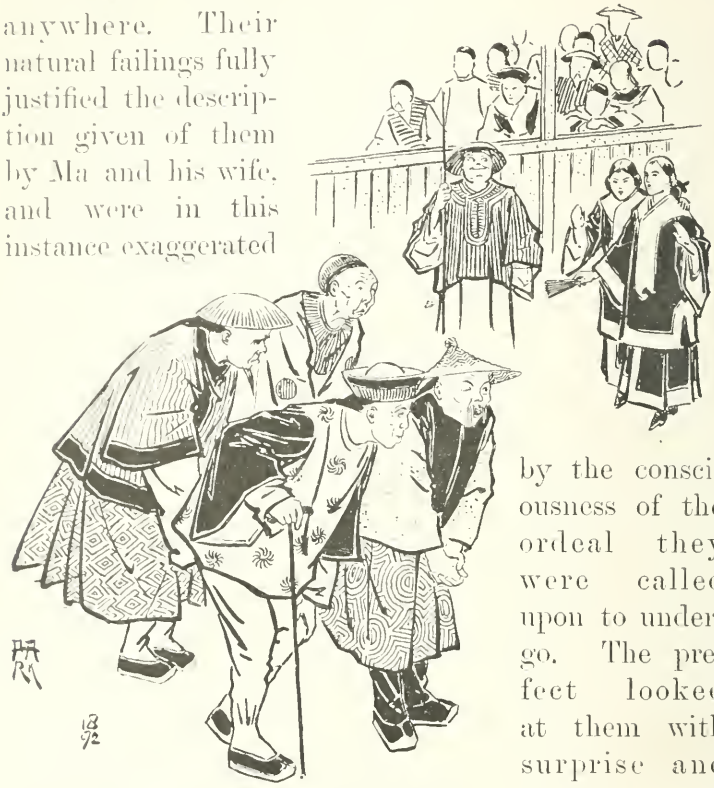
"May it please your Excellency," replied Daffodil, in a low and nervous tone, "we are the children—the only children—of these our parents."

"Come nearer," rejoined the prefect, in a voice that had no stern judicial ring about it, "and speak without reserve to me; for if I do not espouse your cause and shield you from wrong, may my father's ashes be scattered to the wind, and my mother's grave be dishonoured. Tell me, now, have you any desire to marry any of the four suitors your father and mother have provided for you? and if you have, tell me to which you incline."

"We know nothing of these young men, your Excellency," said Daffodil.

"Well, when you hear that, according to your parents' description, one is blind, another lame, a third silly, and the fourth wicked, I should hardly expect that you would care to make their acquaintance. However, as they are in attendance I shall have them in, that you may see what manner of men they are." Turning to an officer, he added, "Send in the four suitors in this case."

As the young men entered, all eyes were turned towards them, and certainly a sorrier quartet it would be difficult to find anywhere. Their natural failings fully justified the description given of them by Ma and his wife, and were in this instance exaggerated by the consciousness of the ordeal they were called upon to undergo. The prefect looked at them with surprise and disgust; and the twins, who held Tsin and Te as their models, regarded them with horror from behind their fans.



"A sorrier quartet it would be difficult to find."

"Well?" said the prefect, turning to Daffodil and Convolvulus.

"Oh, your Excellency!" plaintively ejaculated the twins in one breath.

"I quite understand you, and your verdict is exactly what I should have expected; and since it is plain to me,—come a little nearer; I fear you cannot hear what I say,—that your parents are as incapable of understanding your value as monkeys are of appraising the price of apple-green jade, I shall take on myself the matter of your marriages. Are not prefects 'the fathers and mothers of the people'? and if so, then I am both your father and your mother. Put yourselves into my hands, then. Trust in me; and if I do not do the best I can for you, may I die childless, and may beggars worship at my tomb!"

"How can we thank you," said Daffodil, who was always readiest with her words, "for your boundless condescension and infinite kindness towards your handmaidens? May your Excellency live for ten thousand years, and may descendants of countless generations cheer your old age!"

"Thank you for your good wishes," said the prefect. "I must take time to consider the course I shall pursue, and will let you know the result." Then turning to Ma and his wife, he said in quite another tone—"Take your daughters home, and do not venture to make any arrangements for their future until you hear from me."

So saying he rose, but, contrary to his usual habit, waited to arrange his papers until the sylph-like forms of the twins had disappeared through the folding-doors, when he retired precipitately.

The next morning Ma was surprised by a visit from the prefect, who had found it necessary, he said, to

inform the twins in person of his intentions towards them. Having greeted his wards with all the affection of a guardian, he said—

"On thinking over the matter of your marriages, I have determined to hold an examination preliminary to the coming official examination, and I propose to offer you as the prizes to be awarded to the two scholars who shall come out at the top of the list. In this way we shall have at least a guarantee that your husbands will be learned, and likely to gain distinction in official life."

"But suppose," put in Convolvulus timidly, "they should be married men?"

"Ah, I never thought of that!" said the prefect, laughing. "Well, I will tell you what I will do. It happens that a hunter brought me in this morning a brace of the most beautiful gazelles, and these I will give to the two top married men, as dim and bleared emblems of the still more lovely creatures which will fall to the lot of the two successful bachelors."

The prefect accompanied his remark with a smile and bow which added another tinge of colour to the blushes which had already suffused the brilliant cheeks of the twins, whose modest confusion had scarcely subsided when he took his departure.

The appearance, two or three days after this interview, of a semi-official proclamation announcing the examination and specifying the prizes in store for the winners, produced the wildest excitement in the town. The proceedings before the prefect had

become notorious, and the rare beauty of the twins was, if possible, exaggerated by the thousand-tongued rumours which spread of their exceeding loveliness. To Daffodil the ordeal suggested no uneasiness. For, feeling confident of the surpassing talent of Tsin, she entertained no doubt that he would come out first upon the list. But with Convolvulus the case was different; for, though devotedly attached to Te, she had wit enough to recognise that his literary talents were not on a par with his distinguished appearance. The uneasiness she thus felt found vent in words at one of the stolen interviews in the arbour, and Te frankly admitted that he had been tortured by the same misgiving.

"If I could only dive into the prefect's mind," he said, "and find out what themes he has chosen for the two essays, I should have no fear."

These words sank deep into Convolvulus's soul, and in a conversation with Daffodil, in which she expressed her fears for Te, she repeated what he had said, adding—

"Do you think that we could worm out of the prefect something about the themes he is going to set?"

"I do not know, but we might try," replied her sympathetic sister. "The best plan would be, I think, that we should express in a casual way a liking for some classical piece, and it is possible that to pay us a compliment he might be kind enough to choose the themes out of it. For, dear old man, I saw from behind my fan a look in his eyes when he made us that pretty speech the other day that made

me think of mother's saying, 'Men propose and women dispose.' Only yesterday dear Tsin taught me a lovely ode out of the 'Book of Poetry,' beginning—

> 'See where before you gleams the foaming tide
> Of Tsin and Wei down-sweeping in their pride.'

It was so pretty of him to choose an ode in which his own dear name occurs, was it not? Now, don't you think that in the letter we have to write to the prefect to-day about the copy of the proclamation he sent us, we might put in a quotation from this ode? It would at least please him, for I know he is fond of poetry, and it is possible that it might draw a remark from him which we may turn to account. It is full of lines which would make capital themes."

"Oh, Daffodil, how clever you are! If you and Tsin have sons they will all, I am sure, be *Chwang-yuen*.[1] Your device is excellent. Let us set to work at once to compose the letter."

So down they sat to the task, and after much cogitation, Daffodil drafted the following:—

"May it please your Excellency,—Your humble servants on their knees have received the jade-like epistle and proclamation which you deigned to send them. With rapture they have admired the pearl-like style of your brilliant pencil, and with endless gratitude they recognise your kindness and bounty, which are as wide and far-reaching as 'the gardens beyond the Wei' described in the 'Book of Poetry.'"

"Now, what do you think of that?" said Daffodil,

[1] The title of the senior wrangler of the empire.

as she put down her pencil. "*I* think it is neat. It brings in the reference to the ode without any seeming effort, and will, if I mistake not, tickle our friend's fancy for classical quotations."

"Oh, it is excellent," said Convolvulus. "With the twig so cleverly limed, I feel sure we shall catch our bird."

And the results proved Convolvulus to be right; for on the following day the prefect called again, and in conversation with the twins, with whom he had now grown familiar, he remarked—

"So I see you have read the 'Book of Poetry.'"

"Yes," said Convolvulus; "and it was such a pleasure to be able to quote our favourite ode in writing to our dearest friend."

The prefect, touched and pleased at this artless expression of regard, rejoined—

"It so happens that that is one of my favourite odes also. The description," added he, waxing enthusiastic, "of the wide-sweeping rivers, and the lovely gardens, with the admixture of human interests in the mention of lovers toying beneath the shade, presents to my mind a picture which is literally laden with beauty and delight."

"Though, of course, I am quite incapable of understanding *all* that you mean, it has occurred to me in reading the ode," replied Daffodil, "that every line is like a seed of corn, which, if properly treated, may be made to bring forth rich literary fruit."

"I cannot help thinking, Miss Daffodil," said the prefect, "that if you were to enter the lists at the examination you would probably win yourself."

"What a barren triumph it would be!" said Daffodil, laughing. "But if I competed at all," she added, "I should insist on your taking this ode as our text, and then I should reproduce the ideas you have just given us, and win the prize."

"Well, I tell you what I will do if you will keep my secret," said he. "I *will* give the themes from this ode, and then you and your sister will be able to judge whether the winners deserve the prizes. But what is the matter with your sister?"

This exclamation was caused by Convolvulus dropping her teacup on to the floor and breaking out into hysterical sobbing.

"Oh, she is rather subject to these attacks at this time of the year," said Daffodil, running to her side. "Will you excuse my attending to her?"

"Oh, don't think of me for a moment. Please look after your sister. I will go off at once, and shall send over in the afternoon to inquire how she is."

As the door closed on the prefect, Convolvulus sobbed out: "Oh, how stupid I have been! But I could not help it. Dear Te is now safe."

That afternoon there were great rejoicings in the summer-house, and Daffodil's *finesse* was eulogised in terms which to an unprejudiced observer might have seemed adulatory. And it was generally agreed between the four lovers that by steady application during the month which intervened before the examination, Te might easily make himself so completely master of all that had been written on the ode in question that he could not fail to succeed. With ready zeal, on the very next morning he set to work

at the commentaries, and beginning with Mao's, he waded carefully through the writings of every weighty critic down to the present time. In the intervals of leisure he practised essay-writing under the guidance of Tsin, and made such progress that Convolvulus was in raptures; and even Daffodil, reflecting the opinion of Tsin, was loud in her praises of his diligence and success.

At last the examination day arrived, and armed with the good wishes and benedictions of the twins, the two friends betook themselves to the prefect's *yamun*. On entering the courtyard they found that rows of tables, separated by temporary partitions on the sides and at the back, were ranged in the usually empty space. At the door was a secretary — a stranger — who gave to each a numbered ticket, and inscribed their names on a register; while another official allotted to each a table, and distributed paper, ink, and pencils. In their impatient anxiety our two heroes had come early; but from the noise and excitement which began immediately to echo on every side of them, it was plain that there were very many others who were minded to be in good time also. At length, when every table was full, and every ticket given away, a drum was sounded, the folding-doors were closed, and the competitors were cut off from the outer world for the rest of the day. Presently the prefect entered at the upper end of the hall, and having taken his seat on a raised dais, thus addressed the assembled scholars :—

"You are all doubtless aware of the unusual circumstances under which I am holding this examina-

tion, and I take it for granted that you are cognisant of the prizes which are to be won by the two most successful competitors." Many an eye sparkled at this reference to the twins. "The two themes on which I shall ask you to write as many essays are taken from the ode of the 'Book of Poetry,' entitled 'The Tsin and the Wei.'" Here Te gave a great sigh of relief. "The first consists of the two opening lines—

> 'See where before you gleams the foaming tide
> Of Tsin and Wei down-sweeping in their pride;'

and the second, of what I may call the refrain of the ode—

> 'Beyond the watery waste of mighty Wei
> There blooms a garden rich in blossoms gay,
> Where lads and lasses toy in shady bowers,
> And pelt each other with soft-scented flowers.'

You will have observed that a secretary, who has been kindly lent me for the occasion by the Viceroy of the province, took down your names at the door, placing them on his scroll opposite the numbers corresponding with those on your tickets. Having finished your essays, you will be good enough to sign at the foot of each the number on your tickets—not your names. After the papers have been examined, and the order of merit arranged, this sealed envelope which I hold in my hand, and which contains the secretary's scroll, will be opened, and the names of the winners ascertained and announced. As the task of going over the essays will be a long one, I propose to proclaim the award on the fifteenth of the present month at noon. And now to your tasks. The prizes

offered you are well worth a struggle, and I cannot imagine any objects more calculated to stir the blood and fire the imaginations of young men like yourselves than the lovely daughters of Ma."

"Oh, there is Te!"

When the students had settled down to their work, the prefect, acting on a sudden impulse, sent to invite the twins to look down at the competitors from the latticed gallery which ran along one side of the courtyard. Such an opportunity of looking down upon five hundred possible husbands was not to be lost, and as quickly as their chair coolies could carry them they presented themselves at the door of the private apartments. The prefect, who had grown quite alert when Daffodil and her sister were in question, snatched a moment from his duties in the hall to escort them to the gallery. Once alone they eagerly scanned the five hundred for the lineaments of their lovers.

"Te is in difficulties."

"Oh, there is Te!" said Daffodil. "I know him by the lie of his pigtail."

"Where do you mean?" asked Convolvulus, seeing

that her sister was looking in quite another direction to the one in which her eyes had been riveted for some minutes.

"In the front row, and about the tenth from this end."

"Why, you silly thing, there the dear fellow is, sitting in the fourth row, with his sleeves tucked up and his spectacles on."

"Well, then, all I can say is, that there is another young man with a pigtail exactly like Te's. Do you see Tsin?" she added, after a pause. "He is writing as though his life depended on it, and smiling at times as though some happy thoughts were crossing his mind."

"Oh!" exclaimed Convolvulus presently, "Te is in difficulties. He is biting the end of his pencil, as he always does when he is stranded for want of matter. I wish I were by him to encourage him."

"I don't think your presence would be likely to add much to the concentration of his thoughts," remarked her sister.

"Oh, there, he is off again! I wonder what thought suggested itself to him at that moment. Do you know, I sometimes think that Te and I are able to communicate mentally by speechless messages, for I have several times found that we have both been thinking of the same thing at the same moment."

"Oh, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful! But now we must be going, or those men near us will hear us chattering." So sending a dutiful farewell to the prefect, they returned home to await the arrival of their lovers, who had promised to report progress after the

"THEY LEANED OVER TO GREET THEIR LOVERS."—*Page* 116.

labours of the day. As the shades of evening fell, the sound of well-known footsteps brought the sisters to the balcony of the summer-house, and as they leaned over to greet their lovers, the young men instinctively paused to admire the beauty of the picture they made. Their light and graceful forms, clothed with all the taste and brilliancy of richly embroidered robes, and their exquisite features lit up with pleasure and expectancy, presented a foreground which found fitting surroundings in the quaint carving of the arbour and the masses of wistaria-blossom, which drooped like bunches of grapes from the eaves and every coign of vantage.

"Well?" they asked.

"Good news," was the answer. "The prefect was as good as his word, and everything turned out exactly as we had expected."

"That is capital. But we were sorry you did not sit together," said Daffodil.

"How do you know that we did not?" said Tsin, with surprise.

"And why, Te, did you tuck up your sleeves, as though you were going to contend with a sword, rather than with a pen?" said Convolvulus.

"Now, who told you that I tucked up my sleeves? Confess, or I'll——"

"Oh, what a pair of unsympathetic mortals you are!" broke in Daffodil, who was too happy to be silent. "There were we looking down upon you from the latticed gallery, and you were no more conscious of our presence than if you had been made of stone."

"And, Te, dear," said Convolvulus, "once when

your ideas had evidently forsaken you, I longed to be at your side to help you out. And I think my longing wish must have been of some use, for almost immediately you set to work again."

"Let us go for a stroll in the garden, and we will talk it all over," was the reply of the enamoured Te.

The ten days which elapsed between the examination and the announcement of the results passed slowly with Tsin and Te, and were mainly occupied in going over each point they had made and each opportunity they had missed. In the preliminary studies Tsin had among other points striven to impress upon Te the importance of drawing a comparison between the effect of the licentious music of the state of Ching, as illustrated by the manners of the people described in the ode, and that produced by the austere strains of Wei. But when the moment came for the use of this comparison, Te found himself hopelessly confused, and ended by attributing to the exceptionally pure airs of Wei an impropriety which bordered on grossness.

The recollection of this and other shortcomings weighed heavily on Te's spirits, and tortured him even in the presence of his lady-love.

"But what matters it," said that young lady, "if you do fail in one direction, so long as you make up for it in others? It is no use making a bridge wider than the river."

"True," replied Te; "but what if an architect puts his materials together so badly that they topple over into the stream?"

"What should you say of an architect," answered

Convolvulus, "who built a good bridge, and could not sleep of a night if a leaf stirred for fear it should be blown down?"

"Well, my eyes will not now be long 'blackened with the pencil of sleeplessness,' to use your own pretty imagery," answered her lover. "And I really don't know whether to wish that between this and the fifteenth Time should fly or move with leaden feet. At all events, I enjoy your presence now, and it may be that then it will be lost to me for ever."

"I should not give up hope even if you failed," replied the cheery little Convolvulus. "There are more ways of catching a bird than grasping his tail."

The intense anxiety felt by Tsin and Te as to their success or failure caused them, as perhaps was only natural, to lose sight, to a certain extent, of the fact that to the young ladies there was even more depending on the fifteenth than to themselves; for, after all, their failure would only bring on them a negative misfortune, while it was within the bounds of possibility that Daffodil and Convolvulus might find themselves bound to partners whom they loathed. The twins' interest in the day was heightened by the arrival of the prefect on the afternoon of the fourteenth, to invite them to be present on the following morning.

"I have arranged," said he, "a pretty little alcove on one side of the hall, where you can sit with your mother and watch the proceedings. As you know, I inserted a saving clause into my proclamation, reserving to myself the right of rejecting any student who should appear physically unworthy of you; and

it may be that I may wish to refer the decision on such a delicate point to yourselves."

"How thoughtful you are, your Excellency! But I am sure we may trust you not to give us pock-marked, bald, or stunted husbands," said Daffodil, smiling.

"Now describe your idea of what a husband should be," replied the prefect.

"First of all, he must be tall," answered Daffodil, drawing a mental picture of Tsin, "with broad shoulders and an upright figure. He should have a well-formed nose, a bright eye, and a glossy pigtail."

"Just what I used to be in bygone days," thought the prefect to himself. Somehow lately he had taken to wishing that life was beginning with him anew, and after each interview with the twins he had returned to regard Madam Lo's matronly figure with increasing disfavour. On this particular occasion he was evidently bent on enjoying himself, and seemed disposed to reproduce in Ma's garden the free and easy manners of the frequenters of the "shady bowers" "beyond the watery waste of mighty Wei." Nothing loath, the girls indulged his humour, and when he finally took his leave he carried off with him one of Daffodil's prettily enamelled hairpins and Convolvulus's bangle.

On the following morning the town was early astir, and quite a crowd collected at Ma's doorway to see the twins start for the prefect's *yamun*. In that usually decorous building the scene was tumultuous. Not only did the five hundred competitors present

themselves, but when it became known that the beautiful twins would be present, nearly the whole male population of the town, including myself, poured into the courtyard. The police and lictors had no light task in keeping order; and when the twins stepped into the alcove a rush was made to that side of the courtyard, which threatened to break down the barrier that enclosed the hall. Even the sounding of the drum and the appearance of the prefect produced little or no effect on the disorder which prevailed; and it was not until two or three of the most obtrusive admirers of the two beauties had been seized and flogged on the spot, that sufficient silence was obtained to allow of the opening of the proceedings.

"I have read," said the prefect, addressing the competitors, "with the greatest care the essays which you handed in on the fifth, and after much consideration I have selected two sets as being the best of those contributed by bachelors, and two whose authors are married men. As there is less to say about the married men, I will dispose of them first. I find that Ping and Lung are the winners in that competition. Let Ping and Lung step forward. Your essays," said the prefect, addressing the two scholars, "are extremely creditable, and I have much pleasure in presenting you with the gazelles which I advertised as your reward. I am only sorry for you that they are not the gazelles on my left hand," pointing to the twins.

"Most cordially do we echo your regret, your Excellency," said Ping, casting longing eyes towards

the alcove; "but failing those priceless prizes, we thank you for the gifts you have conferred upon us.

"Now," said the prefect, "I come to the bachelors."

At these words there was a movement and excitement in the hall, which showed how deeply the admiration of the competitors had been stirred by the unparalleled beauty of the two sisters. To both Tsin and Te the moment was one of supreme concern. Tsin held his breath and bit his lip, while Te wrung his perfectly dry pocket-handkerchief as though it had been used, as well it might have been, to wipe the perspiration from off his streaming forehead.

"With regard to the winner of the first prize," he added, "I have no hesitation in pronouncing my decision. Beyond compare the essays of Tsin, in whom I am glad to recognise the son of an old friend, are infinitely the best. Not only do they display originality of thought and brilliancy of diction, but the depth of the scholarship they manifest is perfectly wonderful. I could not have believed that any scholar could have possessed so minute and accurate a knowledge of the writings of the scholiasts of all ages. I have known men who have been thoroughly acquainted with the critics of the Chow dynasty; others with those of the Han dynasty; others, again, with those of the T'ang dynasty;—but never have I met with any who had mastered so thoroughly the writings of all of them. And it becomes almost bewildering when one thinks that his knowledge of the scholia on every other ode in the 'Book of Poetry' is as perfect as his knowledge of the commentaries of this one. For why should I

suppose that his attention has been especially attracted to this ode? Without question, then, I give the palm to Tsin. But with regard to the second prize I confess to have been in some doubt. However, after mature consideration, I have determined to award it to a gentleman of the name of Te." Here Convolvulus, who had been leaning forward to catch every word, threw herself back in her chair with a sigh of relief. "The genius," went on the prefect, "displayed by Tsin is wanting here, and there is a lack of literary ease, and sometimes a confusion of thought which has surprised me; but at the same time I cannot overlook the fact that, like Tsin, Te possesses an extraordinarily accurate knowledge of the ancient commentators. His power of quotation is prodigious, and it would almost seem that he had learnt the commentaries by heart. Proof of such untiring diligence and of such a wonderful memory may not be passed over, and I therefore proclaim Te the winner of the second prize. Tsin and Te stand forth."

With some trepidation the two young men stepped forward and made a profound bow to the prefect, who rose and went over to the twins.

"Do these young men satisfy your requirements, young ladies?" asked the prefect, smiling on them.

"Exceedingly well, your Excellency," said Daffodil.

Then returning to his seat, the prefect continued—

"To you, O most fortunate Tsin, the fates have awarded the incomparable Daffodil; while to your lot, Te, falls the equally matchless Convolvulus. Ascend the dais and let me introduce you to your brides."

With alacrity the young men mounted the steps and advanced towards the alcove. At the moment that they made their bow and swore their fealty, the band, which the prefect had provided for the occasion, struck up the well-known wedding air, "The Phœnixes in concord sing," and the courtyard rang with the shouts of "Good!" "good!" "Very good!" "good!" "good!"

After a short pause, caused by the difficulty of getting Ma and his wife to their appointed places in the hall, the happy couples made obeisance to heaven and earth, and to their parents; and then, with a deep reverence to the prefect, turned at his invitation towards the private apartments of the *yamun*, where, as I afterwards learned, he entertained them at a sumptuous feast. At the moment that the bridal procession passed from the hall the prefect turned to the crowd and said—

"I am quite aware that the course I have pursued on this occasion is an unusual one, and that it could only be justified by circumstances such as I was called upon to encounter. The result, however, has surpassed my highest expectations, and to-day we have seen two veritable dragons of learning united to beings of more than earthly beauty. Such a consummation is worthy the labours of the wisest of mankind, and reminds me of those well-known lines of the great poet of the T'ang dynasty—

> 'In all the regions watered by Hwang-ho
> Or Yang-tse-Keang's current, tell me where
> You'd find on sultry plain or mountain snow
> Men half so wise or women half so fair?'"

A TWICE-MARRIED COUPLE.

"WELL, if I could make verses like you, and were as well up in the classics as you are, I should look for a wife among the families of the city merchants, and not throw myself away upon a cashless girl like Green-jade."

The speaker was a young man of the people, and of a forbidding aspect. His sallow cheeks were deeply marked with smallpox, his brow was overhanging, and his features were coarse and unintellectual. His dress was at the same time pretentious and dirty, and his manners were cringing and boisterous. The person addressed was a man of about his own age, but bore higher marks of culture than any displayed by Le Poko. Not that his appearance was by any means pleasing. His eyes were small and restless, his cheek-bones were abnormally high, his under lip protruded in a manner suggestive of meanness, and there was a general air of timidity and unrest about his gait. Le's remark evidently made an impression upon him. His eyes danced at the thought of the wealth and position which his friend's suggestion conjured up—for he was very

poor, and was often dependent on kindly neighbours for his daily food. But presently a softening influence affected his expression.

"If you knew Green-jade as well as I do," he said to his friend, "you would not give such advice so readily. She has the beauty of Kinlien, the talents of Su Siao-siao, and all the virtues of the mother of Mencius. Added to which she is very fond of me, and would be content to keep house in a mat-shed and live on broken victuals, if I could make her my wife."

"And if, my dear Wang, you were to marry her, what would be your position? You would be unable to study, for you would not be able to buy the commonest books, and so all hope of advancement would be over for you. And to earn your bread you would be obliged to become either a common hawker of cheap goods, or a hanger-on at a mandarin's *yamun*. But if you were to take my advice, you might have a library at your disposal, powerful patrons to befriend you, and rich scholars to associate with. You would then be sure to win your way at the Examination Halls, and you might easily rise to a high post in the empire."

Le's mean advice was in accordance with the genuine instincts of his nature; but he had another motive in urging his friend to be faithless to Green-jade. Being the daughter of poor parents, Green-jade was unable to preserve the seclusion common to young ladies, and had not only made the acquaintance of Wang in the market-place and in the street, but had also occasionally chatted with Le. Not that

she had any sympathy whatever with that graceless young man; but knowing that he was a friend of Wang—for whom, strange to say, she had formed a deep attachment—she was ready to be courteous to him. It is, however, a law of nature, that persons should be most attracted towards those of the opposite sex who possess qualities in which they themselves are deficient. And thus it came about that sensual, mean, coarse, and ignorant Le fell head and ears in love with the refined, intellectual, and graceful young person whom her parents had christened Green-jade, in recognition of her priceless value. He was not long in discovering, however, that Green-jade's affections were settled on his friend; nor had he any difficulty in finding out from Wang that what passed for his heart was given in exchange. Indeed the intercourse between the lovers had gone beyond the stage of chats in the market-place. Wang had of late been constantly in the habit of dropping in of an evening to see his neighbour Mr Chang, whose daughter would bring them tea and fill their pipes, while listening to their conversation on the wisdom of the ancients, the deep philosophy of the classics, and the soul-stirring poetry of the days of Confucius. To these things did Green-jade seriously incline, and with a greedy ear she devoured the discourse of the two scholars. It even sometimes happened that when her father was called away on household matters she would take up the theme, and Wang was charmed to find how just a literary taste was combined with the striking personal charms of his inamorata.

By degrees their chance interviews became less

classical and more personal. And though never crossing by one iota the boundary-line of strict propriety, Green-jade gave Wang evidences which were not to be misunderstood, that, if he would play the part of a Fêng, she would be willing to take the *rôle* of a Hwang.[1]

Such was the position of affairs when Le poured the poison of his advice into Wang's ears. Not on one occasion only but repeatedly he urged the same counsel, and even went the length of inquiring in the town for an heiress whose parents might be willing to link her fate with that of a promising scholar. Little by little his proposal, which had at first shocked Wang, became more palatable to him, and before long he even began to form schemes of work, and to dream of promotion won by the wealth of his rich bride. In this frame of mind he found visits to Chang's house distasteful, and he avoided meeting Green-jade as far as possible. Though he had enjoyed her company, he was incapable of feeling any deep affection for her. He was flattered by her evident liking and admiration for him, but beyond the sensation of gratified vanity, he had no sentiment towards her. With Green-jade, however, matters were very different. She had, with that wild infatuation which is common to imaginative young women, given her heart entirely to Wang, and she had become accustomed to regard his visits to her father as the bright spots in her existence. In her blind partiality

[1] The Fêng and Hwang are the male and female phœnixes which are regarded as emblems of bride and bridegroom.

she had entirely overlooked the meanness of his character, which was sufficiently obvious to less prejudiced observers. The discontinuance of his visits was therefore a grief and a surprise to her. Day after day she watched eagerly for his arrival. Every footfall raised her expectations, and her disappointment as they disappeared in the distance was in proportion to the depth of her longing.

With unnecessary scrupulousness she reproached herself with having done something to offend Wang, never imagining it possible that any fickleness on his part could account for the change; and even when rumours reached her — and Le took care that they should—that Wang was seeking to ally himself with a wealthy family in the neighbourhood, she still attributed his altered conduct to some fault of her own which she had unconsciously committed. With stern self-introspection she examined the whole course of her conduct from the time of her first acquaintance with Wang to find out wherein her fault lay, and wept bitter tears over words spoken and deeds done which she fancied might have given offence.

Meanwhile Le's agents had been busy, and had brought Wang a proposal which in some respects fulfilled his highest expectations. As in all large cities, the beggars in K'aifêng Fu were a numerous and powerful body. They exercised a social tyranny over the inhabitants, and habitually levied blackmail from them. If any one more daring than the rest ventured to resist their exactions, they invaded his dwelling or place of business, and kept up such a clatter with bells, broken dishes, and hollow bamboos,

that he was soon obliged to yield to their demands. There was only one man to whom these lawless vagabonds yielded ready obedience. From time immemorial the chieftainship of the beggars of K'ai-fêng Fu had been vested in a certain Chu family which had grown rich on the dues paid by the individual beggars, and by the interest exacted on money lent to unfortunate members of the ragged army in times of need. So wealthy had the existing chief become, that he had for some time before the period at which our story opens ceased to take any active part in the administration of the beggar clan, and having no son, had delegated his authority to a nephew, known as "the Leper," from the fact of his having unfortunately contracted that disease in pursuit of his calling.

Chu had been early left a widower, with one daughter, of whom he was dotingly fond. Her slightest wish was eagerly attended to, and in all household matters her word was law. She was pretty also, and though not highly cultured she possessed many pleasant qualities. She was generous, affectionate, and bright-humoured, and was highly popular among her associates.

So soon as she arrived at a marriageable age, her father sought to find her a suitable husband among the young men of the city. Being rich, he thought that he might naturally expect to ally her with a youth of the official class, and accordingly employed a go-between, a certain Mrs Kin, to search out one who should be worthy of her. The go-between, who had a better appreciation of the position than Chu,

undertook the mission with many doubts, which were confirmed when the parents of one and all declined with scorn to connect their son with so meanly born a maiden.

It was just as she had received a rebuff from the wife of the district magistrate, whose son had originally been low down in the list which Chu had given her, that Le's proposal on behalf of Wang reached her. The suggestion appeared to her to be a reasonable one, but she felt that some diplomacy would be required to reconcile Chu to the idea. There was a wide difference between the son of a mandarin and the penniless son of a deceased small shopkeeper, who though clever, it is true, had yet all his honours to win. It was with some trepidation, therefore, that she presented herself before Chu to report on her mission.

"Well, dame, what news have you for me?" inquired Chu as he greeted her.

"In some respects," replied Mrs Kin, "the Fates have been adverse, but they have been cruel only to be kind. It so happens that all those families you mention to me, from that of the Taotai downwards, are, for one reason or another, prevented, much to their annoyance," she added without a blush, "from accepting your most tempting offer. In some cases the young men were already engaged, in others ill health made marriage impossible, and in one or two instances I heard such dreadful accounts of the young men's manners of life that I suggested difficulties."

"So far the Fates seem to have been very adverse,"

said Chu; "but what have you to set on the other side of the account?"

"Why, then," replied the go-between, "just as I had begun to think that I should have but a poor account to give of my negotiation, I happened to meet a Mr Le, who is himself a no mean scholar, and who mentioned to me casually that a young bachelor friend of his, who is as learned as Chu Hi and as loftily-minded as Confucius, was anxious to ally himself with a lady who might be fitted in all respects to share the greatness which unquestionably awaits him, so soon as he shall have passed his examinations."

"And who is this paragon?" asked Chu.

"His name is Wang," said Mrs Kin, "and most appropriately is he so called,[1] for he is made to rule. The only thing against him is that at present he is poor; but if you consent to bestow your honoured loved one upon him you will cure that fault, and will give wings to this butterfly which will enable him to fly at once to the summit of the mountain of honour."

"What is his parentage?"

"His father," replied the go-between, "was a trader, and unfortunately died before he had made that fortune which would have inevitably been his if the Fates had not snapped his thread of life. On his mother's side he is related with a very distinguished family in Peking, one member of which now holds office in the Board of War; and another would have doubtless succeeded to great honour, had not

[1] *Wang* means to rule.

some colleagues, jealous of his rising fame, accused him of treason, and so turned the Dragon countenance against him that he was most unjustly beheaded."

"Dear, dear! that was unlucky," said Chu, who, in face of the non-success of his first proposals, began to take kindly to Mrs Kin's overtures. "But tell me something of this young man's personal appearance."

"To be quite truthful with you," replied Mrs Kin, who constantly employed this kind of adjuration when she spoke the truth, in order to give an air of authenticity to her statements generally, "I have not seen him yet. But if Mr Le, who has honesty stamped on his face if ever man had, is to be believed, he is as handsome as one of the eight immortals."

"It is a pity that his circumstances are so poor," said Chu, anxious not to seem over-desirous for the match.

"What is there in that?" said Mrs Kin. "Was not Kwan Ti[1] a seller of bean-curd in early life? And was not Han Sin,[2] when young, so poor that he was obliged to obtain sustenance by angling for fish in a castle moat?"

Overwhelmed by these historical allusions, Chu gave way, and commissioned Mrs Kin to consult a soothsayer as to the agreement of the Mêntanghu (family relationships) on either side. Pleased with her success, Mrs Kin went direct to Wang and com-

[1] Kwan Ti, a celebrated general who was canonised as the God of War.

[2] Han Sin, a statesman who was created Prince of Ts'u.

municated to him the result of her interview. At the same time she enlarged on the immense wealth of the lady's family, and the beauty and accomplishments of Miss Pearl. Wang was secretly delighted with her news, but was shrewd enough to appear indifferent.

"I am sure," he said, "I am very grateful to you for the interest you have taken in this matter. But unfortunately my circumstances are not such as would enable me to make the necessary wedding-presents, and I propose, therefore, to put off all thoughts of marriage until I have won my way to office."

"If Miss Pearl were an ordinary young lady, I should applaud your prudence," answered Mrs Kin; "but, as a matter of fact, she is one in ten thousand, a stork among poultry, a sun among stars, and to neglect the chance of an alliance with her is to fly in the face of the gods. And as to the wedding-presents, do not bestow one moment's thought upon them. I will arrange that they shall be as handsome as any that the Prefect's daughter got yesterday, and that you shall not be asked for a single cash on account of them until your pockets are overflowing with Miss Pearl's taels."

"On those conditions I am, if the lady is all you describe her to be, ready at least that you should open negotiations on the subject."

With this consent Mrs Kin took her leave, and lost no time in consulting a soothsayer on the prospects of the match. As she was able to promise a liberal fee, the result of her conference with the deities coincided exactly with her wishes. The next

full moon was the time indicated by the Fates for the marriage, and the happiness promised to the young people was such as was to surpass the common lot of men. Mr Chu made most liberal preparations for the ceremony; and a complaisant money-lender, who had many a time and oft advanced money in promotion of Mrs Kin's schemes, willingly lent the sum required by Wang to provide the wedding-gifts.

As the match was not a particularly brilliant one in a social point of view, Mr Chu determined that he would make up in magnificence for what was wanting in that respect. As the day approached his house became a scene of wild confusion. Upholsterers were at work in the reception-rooms, as well as in those the young couple were to occupy; presents for the bride came pouring in; and milliners, accompanied by coolies bearing loads of silks and satins, haunted Miss Pearl's apartments. That young lady looked forward to her bridal day with mingled feelings. She knew enough of life to know that the reports of professional go-betweens were not always to be believed, and that marriage was not always the state of bliss that it was commonly reported to be. At the same time, her ambition was stirred. She saw plainly, if her father did not, that her parentage was a fatal bar to a good marriage, and she felt that her only chance of escape from the stigma which was cast upon her by her father's calling lay in marrying a man who would win by his talents a position for himself in the State. The inquiries she made privately convinced her that Wang's abilities were such as to secure him an official appointment, and she deter-

mined that no expense should be spared to enable him to surround himself with rich and powerful friends.

Meanwhile the report which had reached Green-jade's ears of Wang's intended marriage was fully confirmed with every circumstance of time and place. The hope which she had cherished that he might yet return to his old intimacy at her father's house was crushed fifty times a-day by the rumours which reached her of the magnificent preparations which were being made at Mr Chu's, and of the bridal gifts which Wang was collecting for presentation to his bride. Little did the gossips know the misery which they were inflicting on the poor girl by the news they brought her, and much did they wonder that she turned away from their chatter without asking a single question about the bride and bridegroom. She never told her love, and struggled on through her daily employments with a heavy heart and a deepening sorrow. The light was taken out of her life. There were no longer any meetings and talks to look forward to, and there remained only a danger of her settling down into a condition of despair. Even her father, who was not an observant man, could not help noticing that she had lost all elasticity of manner, and putting it down to ill health, urged her to pay a visit to a relative living at Tsining, on the Grand Canal.

Fortunately at this juncture a letter came from the relative in question, asking Green-jade, for whom the writer had a great affection, to undertake the instruction of her little girl, her own health being unequal

to the task. The proposal was accompanied by many expressions of kindness and regard, and a liberal remuneration was offered for the required service. The lady, a Mrs Ting, who was a cousin of Green-jade's father, had been fortunate enough to marry a man who was not only an excellent husband, but was also a man of great ability. With unusual rapidity he had risen through the lower grades of the public service, and was at the time of which we speak Prefect of Tsining. Green-jade, in the frame of mind in which she then was, eagerly welcomed the offer; and her father, though grieved at the idea of losing the society of his daughter, felt that it was an opportunity of providing for her which he ought not to refuse. The proposal was therefore accepted, and poor little Green-jade busied herself in making such preparations as it was within her means to compass.

The news of Green-jade's intended departure produced on Wang and Le very opposite effects. To Wang it was a relief to know that he would be no longer annoyed by the consciousness of her presence. He was not the least conscience-stricken for the part he had played, but it was disagreeable to him to witness the effect of his misconduct. But Le was in despair. With all the force possible to men of his coarse nature he loved Green-jade, and the idea of losing sight of her was misery to him. He had not intended urging his suit until after Wang's marriage, lest his treachery to his friend should become too apparent. But the turn which events had taken determined him to seek an interview with Chang at once. He was fortunate enough to find him alone.

"I hear," he said to his host, "that your 'honoured loved one' is preparing for a journey. May I ask if she is likely to be long absent from your palace?"

"My insignificant daughter," replied Chang, "has not been well of late, and I had proposed that she should pay a visit to the wife of the Prefect of Tsining, who is a relative of mine, when an invitation from that lady came, asking her to undertake the charge of her daughter. So that, in all probability, she will be away for some years."

"I have long watched your honoured daughter growing up like a fairy among her young companions, or like a phœnix among crows. I have admired her beauty, and have wondered at her learning. As you know, I have not yet 'established a family,' and it would overjoy me to receive your beloved one into my cold dwelling as my bride. May I ask 'my benevolent elder brother' how he regards my proposal?"

Chang had never liked Le, and he was well aware that his daughter shared in the same feeling: he had therefore no hesitation in declining the offer, more especially as he knew that Le's means were of the straitest, and that his modest description of his house was more in accordance with truth than his assertions commonly were. He replied therefore—

"Honoured sir, your proposal reflects glory on our humble family. But my daughter, having undertaken the charge of Prefect Ting's little one, cannot snatch the precious fruit which you so temptingly offer for her acceptance."

"But would it not be possible to decline the Prefect's proposal?" pleaded Le.

"I fear not," replied Chang; "and therefore, while I am much honoured by the proposal you have made, I am regretfully obliged to decline it."

Chang spoke in so positive a way that Le felt that it would be useless to press his suit further, and he therefore took his leave in a by no means enviable mood. Regret at losing Green-jade, whom he had regarded as a sure prize, was largely mingled with wounded vanity, and anger against Chang. For a time he even thought of kidnapping Green-jade when on her way to Tsining, but there were difficulties in the way, not the least of which was that arising from want of cash, and he eventually made up his mind to take every means in his power of revenging himself upon Chang, and of so humiliating him as to make him wish that he had given his consent to the match.

Meanwhile Green-jade's departure for Tsining was speedily followed by Wang's marriage to Miss Pearl. Every accessory which money could buy was provided to add lustre to this last ceremony. The procession of bridal presents on the evening before the wedding was a sight to be seen, and the street arabs pronounced it to be, without question, the finest thing of its kind that had been seen for many years in K'aifêng Fu. But these exterior splendours were entirely eclipsed by the sumptuous decoration of Chu's reception-rooms, and by the feast provided for the wedding guests. Wishing to do Wang every honour, Chu had begged him to ask all his associates to the entertainment; and Wang, desirous to mitigate his friends' sneers at his marriage

by showing them the evidences of his father-in-law's wealth, took advantage of Chu's hospitality to invite all his fellow-students and literary acquaintances. But numerous as these were, there was plenty for them all. The tables literally groaned under the weight of the delicacies which were piled upon them. Birds' nests from the islands, venison from Mongolia, wine from Chekeang, pears and grapes from Shantung, and preserves from Canton, were provided in more than sufficient quantities to satisfy the appetites of the feasters, who, at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony and the retirement of the bride and her bridesmaids, were left to the full enjoyment of the luxuries before them.

Nor were the festivities entirely confined to the inside of the house, for in the street the arrival of the guests had caused a crowd to collect, among whom, by Chu's orders, cash and common viands were distributed. The news of this lavish expenditure quickly reached the beggars' headquarters. The Leper had been aware of the wedding, and supposing that it would be conducted quietly, had not cast a thought on the fact that he, as a kinsman, had not been invited. When, however, his emissaries brought him word that crowds of guests were pouring into Chu's wide-opened doors, and that the feast was almost a public one, he felt that he had been slighted. He was naturally of a touchy nature, and ill health had increased his infirmity.

"What does this proud cousin of mine mean," he exclaimed to a wretched beggar who had crawled in on crutches to tell him of the food and cash which

were to be had outside Chu's house, "by ignoring me, his kinsman, and the beggars who have raised him to his present position of wealth, by not inviting us to his feast? The fact that his daughter is marrying one of the *literati* is no reason why he should turn his back on his relations and old associates."

"That was just what I was thinking as I came along," said the old beggar in a whining tone. "When I was told that you, honoured sir, were not among the guests, and that food and cash were being distributed without any notice having been sent to us, I could scarcely believe it. But now I have seen what is going on with my own eyes, or eye I *should* say," parenthetically remarked the old man with a grim smile, for he had long been blind on one side,—"and here," he said, fumbling in his scrip, "are some of the spoils I brought along with me."

"This is too bad," said the Leper, working himself up into a state of anger. "I will teach him that we are to be reckoned with, though we are beggars. Go," said he to the old cripple, "and call twenty men from the lodging-house, and we will give Chu some clatter which he won't forget in a hurry."

In obedience to this summons, the courtyard was speedily filled with a group of beings who represented every ill that flesh is heir to. The lame, the maimed, the halt, and the blind were all there, and with them victims to every form of disease. Nothing but rags and tatters covered the persons of these lazar-house inmates, while in the hands of each were bells, hollow

bits of bamboo, horns, and whistles, besides the staffs which supported their tottering frames.

On this motley crew the Leper looked with pride. Though better dressed than the beggars, he was scarcely less repulsive-looking than they. The disease from which his nickname was derived had made strange havoc with his features. The skin of his face was lumpy and discoloured, and the irritation under which he was at the moment suffering had added a malignant expression to his afflicted countenance.

"This is too bad."

"Come with me to my cousin Chu's house," he cried, as he stepped into the courtyard, "and help me to give him a lesson in propriety. All the city are feasting at his table, and he has not had the decency either to invite me as a guest or to send us a present of flesh and wine. But I will give him and his friends some music which they will find it hard to dance to."

Thus saying, he led the way to Chu's house, and arrived just as the *convives* were toasting each other in wine, and asking and answering riddles, in accordance with the custom of wedding-feasts. As he and his troop entered the outer courtyard he gave the word to begin the riot, and instantly there rose a clamour which defies description. Imitations, and, to do the beggars justice, very good imitations, of dogs yelping, cats screeching, and cocks crowing, were mingled with the sound of bells, gongs, hollow bamboos, and whistles. Never out of Pandemonium had such discords been heard. At the first outbreak of the noise Chu dropped his cup and turned deadly pale, for he recognised at once the meaning of the disturbance. The guests, less instructed, thought it was the beginning of a mask or play devised for their entertainment, and looked with curiosity towards the door which separated them from the outer yard. They had not long to wait before it was thrown open, when, to their astonished gaze, the Leper at the head of his followers marched into their midst. Straight they walked up to the principal table, and while the Leper took the cup of wine out of Wang's hand, his troop, who were now silent, pounced greedily upon the viands which still encumbered the tables.

Involuntarily the guests slunk away from the intruders, while Chu, who had partly recovered his presence of mind, came forward, and with the best pretence of cordiality which he could assume, paid his compliments to the Leper.

"I am glad to see you, my honoured brother," he said, "and I should have written to invite you if I

had not delegated my powers for the day to my new son-in-law. On the third day after the wedding I am to have my own feast, and you will get an invitation to that in due course. And now let me introduce my son-in-law to you." So saying, Chu turned to the place where Wang had been sitting, but his chair was empty. So were all the seats round the table, and Chu met the gaze of the Leper with a look of blank and astonished annoyance.

"Ha! ha!" cried the Leper, "your fine holiday guests seem as frightened of me as poultry are of a fox. Why, there is not one of them left; and as it is a pity that the table should remain empty, I and my mates will sit down and enjoy ourselves."

Suiting the action to the word, the Leper sat down in Wang's seat, and his noisome companions ranged themselves on the chairs which had been so recently occupied by the silk and satin friends of the bridegroom.

The circumstances were trying, but Chu did his utmost to maintain an outward show of pleasure, even when his mind was tortured with the thought that in the eyes of his son-in-law and his companions he was disgraced for ever. When his tattered guests had satisfied their hunger, which was not for a long time, he turned to the Leper and said—

"I trust that my benevolent elder brother will accept from me a present of food and wine for those other 'flowery ones'[1] who dwell in his palace, and who have not honoured my lowly cottage by their presence to-day."

[1] An expression for beggars.

"THE FLOWERY ONES."—*Page* 144.

"Pray, do not put yourself to so much trouble," replied the Leper. In spite of this gentle disclaimer, Chu ordered his attendants to take a goodly supply of the choicest fare to the Leper's house. The Leper now rose to take his leave.

"I fear we have put you to infinite trouble," said he, as he made his bow, "and that we have sadly disturbed your other guests. But, believe me, my object in coming was to show you that though poor and degraded, I have not lost all interest in my kinsfolk and relations."

"I am deeply indebted to you," said Chu, "for having directed the course of your chariot to my humble dwelling. Your condescension is engraven on the tablets of my heart, and I only regret that I had such poor fare to put before such honoured guests."

So soon as the last cripple had dragged his distorted limbs over the threshold, Chu hurried to his daughter's apartments to express to Wang his intense regret at the *contretemps*. To his surprise he found his daughter alone, weeping bitterly at the disgrace which had fallen on her. Wang, at the invitation of one of the guests, had taken refuge in a neighbouring house until the unwelcome intruders should have taken their departure. While Chu was explaining matters to his daughter Wang returned, and it was easy to see that, though outwardly polite, he was greatly annoyed at the incident. He accepted Chu's apologies with courtesy, and that worthy was fain to leave to his daughter's charms and the advantages of the wealth now at his disposal the task of gradually

obliterating the sense of shame which was plainly uppermost in the mind of his son-in-law. And to some extent, as time went on, these influences had their effect.

Miss Pearl did all she could to soothe and amuse her husband; and to one who had been accustomed all his life long to grinding poverty, the pleasure of having as many taels at command as he had formerly had cash brought a sensation of comfort and relief, which inclined him for a time to fall a satisfied victim to his bride's endearments.

His more liberal income enabled him also to surround himself with books, and by degrees his former fellow-students so far consented to forget the past as to join him in his study, and to cap verses with him over the excellent Suchow wine with which his father-in-law supplied him. By the help of these advantages Wang's scholarship received a finish which enabled him to compete successfully at the examinations, and by the influence of his friends his success was crowned by the receipt of an appointment to the post of commissariat officer to the brigade of troops stationed at Ch'ung K'ing on the Yangtsze-kiang.

There are some men in whom prosperity brings out into relief the worse points in their characters. Wang was one of these. So soon as the novelty of wealth had worn off, the consciousness that he was tied to the daughter of a beggar chieftain became more and more unendurable to him; and his sense of the advantages he had derived from the alliance was lost in regret that now that he was in a position to marry a lady of rank he was no longer able to do

so. Le, who, like a true parasite, had allied himself more closely to Wang as that scholar had risen in the social scale, fostered these feelings for the double purpose of currying favour with his patron, and of avenging himself for some slight which he had suffered, or fancied he had suffered, at the hands of Pearl. So successfully had he wound himself into the good graces of Wang, that he received the appointment of private secretary to the new commissary, and embarked with his patron on the vessel which was to carry him to his post. Pearl took leave of her father with a heavy heart. The change which had come over her husband's demeanour towards her was of too marked a character to admit of any self-deception, and in leaving K'aifêng Fu she felt that she was putting herself entirely in the hands of a man whom she despised, and whose principles were nought. She was of a hopeful nature, however, and trusted to winning back her husband by devotion to his interests and attention to his whims and wishes.

The removal from Chu's house and influence produced an evil effect upon Wang's cowardly nature. He was one of those men with whom fear is the most potent influence, and with his freedom from his father-in-law's presence disappeared the conventional consideration with which he had been accustomed to treat his wife. He left her more and more to the society of her maid-servants, and spent the whole of the day in the company of his graceless secretary. Pearl, who was of an impressionable nature, longed frequently to get him to join in her

admiration of the scenery through which they passed as they glided up the great river. But after one or two attempts she gave up trying to attract his attention, and sat silently wondering at the beetling cliffs of the gorges, and the whirling rapids which rushed through them. Accustomed as she was to the comparatively level country near K'aifêng Fu, the height of the mountains on either side, and the gloom of the passages, occasionally produced a feeling of awe and impending danger which quite unnerved her; and not unfrequently she was obliged to tell Peony, her maid, to shut out the sight by putting up the shutters of the boat.

To these terrors of the imagination was not unfrequently added the presence of real danger. On more than one occasion the rope by which the trackers were towing the boat over the rapids broke, and the craft was sent whirling down through the boiling water, and was only saved from destruction by the boatmen's skill in using the sweeps. After one such adventure in the Witches' Gorge the trackers had with infinite labour dragged the boat up through the foaming surges into the comparatively smooth water above. There they had anchored for the night, and for the first time that day Pearl ventured to look out on the scenery about her.

"How infinitely grand these mountains are!" she said to her faithful attendant, Peony, "but their size and gloom oppress me. I feel so strangely little and powerless in their presence."

"I am beginning to feel the same sensation myself," said Peony; "but all day long I have been

watching the monkeys on the cliffs and the trackers on the towing-path, and I don't know which looked the most ridiculous. The monkeys were playing all sorts of antics, springing from crag to crag, fighting, throwing down stones into the river, and chattering all the while like a lot of magpies; while the men, who had no more clothes on than the monkeys, were jumping from rock to rock, tumbling into the water, and balancing themselves on narrow ledges, like so many boys at play. I wish you could amuse yourself as I do, but since we have been on the river you seem to have lost all interest in what is going on about you."

"I suppose I am not well," said Pearl, "but I feel a depression as of impending danger, and last night I dreamt that that old woman who told me my fortune in the Willow Garden last year appeared before me, and chanted again the doggerel couplet which I had quite forgotten until it came back to me in my dream. Do you remember it?—

> 'When witches' cliffs encircle you about,
> Beware your fate; your sands are near run out.'

What do they call this gorge?"

"The Witches' Mountain gorge."

"Here, then, the fortune-teller's words will be put to the test. And if it is true that coming events cast their shadows before, this woman spoke with the inspiration of a seer."

"Oh, madam, you frighten me," said Peony, half inclined to cry; "please think no more about what that stupid old woman said. My father used to say

in his joking way, 'All women are liars, and fortune-telling women are the greatest liars of all. They only say those things to mystify and amuse people.'"

"Well, time will show whether she was right or not. But I'm so weary that I shall go to bed, and try to forget in sleep the woman's prophecy and my own forebodings."

"And in the morning, madam, we will laugh over your fancies, and will begin the new day with fresh hopes. Who can say that a new life may not be opening to you to-morrow!"

"I would it might!—but come now and help me to undress."

Wang took no notice of his wife's retirement. For some time her comings and goings had been matters of complete indifference to him. On this particular evening, having dined heavily, he was lying in the forepart of the boat with Le, smoking opium. As had not been unusual of late, Wang's *mésalliance*, as he was good enough to call it, was the subject of their conversation, and Le drew many a glowing picture of the matches Wang might make were he but free. As the night wore on Le became more and more eloquent on the theme, unchecked by Wang, whose mean and covetous nature was all aglow at the imaginary prospects which his friend's words conjured up before him. At length Le's fancy failed him, and the two men lay inhaling their opium and enjoying the mental hallucinations which the drug provides for its votaries. Suddenly Le raised himself on his elbow, and said slowly—

"How the water rages and foams past the boat!

If any one were to fall overboard on such a night as this, they would be swept miles away before people would be aware of what had happened. No shriek would be heard in such a rushing stream, and the body would never be found in these countless eddies and whirlpools."

Wang turned sharply round at these words and gazed into Le's face. But that worthy avoided his eye, and appeared to be absorbed in watching the water lashing itself against a boulder-rock which stood out of the river, unmoved by the waves which leapt over it and the current which gurgled round it.

"What do you mean?" he said, in a deep excited voice.

"Nothing," said Le. "But I am going to bed. Good night." So saying, Le sauntered off, but turned as he reached the cabin door and cast one glance at Wang, who had followed his retreating form with a feverish gaze. Presently that worthy rose, inflamed by wine and evil passion, and paced excitedly up and down the deck. Then he looked out upon the waters, and walking carefully along the edge of the boat, removed a temporary taffrail which had been put in the forepart of the vessel. His hand shook so that he accomplished it with difficulty. He next assured himself that the sailors and servants were all asleep, and then went to his wife's room. He pushed back the door and called "Pearl."

"Who is that?" shrieked Pearl, who awoke startled from her sleep, and failed to recognise her husband's voice, so hollow and quivering it was.

"It is I, your husband," said Wang; "come out and look at the moon shining on the river."

Such an invitation sounded so strange to Pearl that she was delighted and rose at once, and began to hope that Peony was a truer prophet than the fortune-teller. But when by the light of the moon she saw Wang's face, a horrible presentiment came over her. She shuddered all over as with cold.

"I won't come out on to the deck," she said, "the night air is so chill, and I can see perfectly here."

"Nonsense," said Wang, seizing hold of her arm; "you must come when I tell you."

"Your looks frighten me," she cried, trembling. "Why do you look so pale, and why do your eyes glare so? But if I must come, let me call Peony to bring me a cloak."

"Call Peony! call the devil!" he said, as he dragged her to the prow.

"Oh, have mercy upon me!" said poor Pearl, as she struggled vehemently to get free. "Only let me go, and I will promise to do everything you wish, and will serve you as a dog his master. Or if you want to get rid of me, I will go home to my father. Have pity on me, and spare my life!"

"Hold your tongue, and stand here!" cried Wang, as he supported her almost fainting form near the edge of the boat.

"Oh, you can't be so cruel as to mean to kill me! Have pity, have mercy upon me!"

For a moment Wang's face seemed to soften, but only for a moment. With a wild glance he looked round to see that no one was about, and then tearing

poor little Pearl's arms from his neck, round which she had thrown them in her misery, he hurled her into the torrent.

With one piercing shriek, and one wild reproachful look, she sank beneath the surface. Almost instantly she rose again into sight, and was then swept away by the force of the current into the distance. Wang had not the nerve to watch her fate, and to listen to her screams, but ran into the cabin and closed the door on the outer world. In a few minutes, which seemed to him like hours, he crept out and gave one hasty glance over the broken, foaming waters astern of the boat. No sign of his victim was visible, and he went back and threw himself on his bed. Sleep was out of the question. His wife's last shriek rang again and again in his ears, and whenever he closed his eyes her face rose up before him out of the darkness, after an instantaneous consciousness that it was coming, in a way which made rest impossible. Once or twice in the night he went on deck to cool his brow, but the sight of the spot on the boat where he had done the deed, and of the waters which held his secret, was too much for him, and he crept back again to bed.

At earliest dawn he awoke the captain of the boat, and ordered him to push on at once. The man, though half asleep, could not but be struck with the deathlike look of Wang's face; but, putting it down to the wine and opium of the night before, made no remark. The noise of the sailors moving about was an infinite relief to Wang, and he began to picture to himself what they would say, and how Peony would

"With one piercing shriek . . . she sank beneath the surface."

behave when Pearl's disappearance became known. This made him think what part he ought to play in the matter. So soon as he could bring his thoughts to bear on the subject, he determined to let Peony make the discovery when she went to her mistress's cabin in the morning, and to profess complete ignorance of the event, allowing it to be supposed that it was a case of suicide.

At his wife's usual hour for rising he heard Peony go to her cabin, and afterwards out on to the deck. Presently she returned, and seemed to be making a search, and then he heard her hurry off as fast as her small feet would carry her to the servants' part of the boat. Almost immediately his valet came to his cabin.

"Your Excellency," said the man, "Peony cannot find my lady; she has searched everywhere for her. But what is the matter, sir?" he added, as he saw Wang's blanched and terror-stricken face; "has anything happened?"

"Why, you fool," said Wang, "you tell me yourself that something has happened, when you say that your lady cannot be found. Help me to dress."

Help was indeed needed. Wang was so completely unnerved that he was scarcely able to stand.

"Shall I bring your Excellency some opium?" suggested the man, seeing his condition.

"Yes, quickly."

The materials for a pipe of the drug were always at hand in Wang's household, and before many minutes had elapsed he was stretched on the divan greedily inhaling the "foreign dirt." Gradually under the

soothing influence of his pipe his eyes lost their wild excited look, his features relaxed, and his hand recovered some of its steadiness. While thus engaged, Le came in and expressed concern at the disappearance of Pearl. He just glanced at Wang with a strange inquiring look, and then turned away.

"Come and help me search for her," said Wang, who had now partly recovered his composure.

Together the pair went out to go through the form of looking for one of whose fate they were equally well informed, for Le had watched the struggle on the deck through his cabin window, and had heard Pearl's wild despairing shriek as she disappeared overboard.

Peony was heart-broken when it became apparent that Pearl was not in the boat. The tone of her mistress's remarks on the previous night suggested to her mind the idea of suicide, and this being repeated to Wang by his valet, brought some degree of relief to the terror-stricken mind of the murderer. The idea of searching in the troubled waters of the rapids was obviously futile, and no halt was therefore made in the progress up-stream. As the day wore on Wang regained his calmness under the influence of opium and the consciousness of personal safety. The sailors noticed that he never went to the forepart of the boat as had been his wont; and Peony took a strange and unaccountable aversion to him, which she was quite unable to repress. Thus the days wore on in the gloom-surrounded boat, and it was an infinite relief to all when at the end of a week they ran alongside the wharf at Ch'ung K'ing.

Meanwhile the same fair wind of promotion which

had made Wang Commissary at Ch'ung K'ing had brought the rank of Intendant of Circuit at the same place to Ting, the Prefect of Tsining. By a further chance the Commissary's boat was only the length of the rapid ahead of that of his superior officer. And on the particular night on which poor Pearl was thrown overboard, Ting, his wife, and Green-jade, were sitting on deck enjoying the beauty of the moon, and watching the foaming waters which came rushing down ahead of them. While thus sitting they were startled by a woman's cry coming from the broken water of the rapid. Such an alarm was no uncommon thing at that spot. Scarcely a day passed but some boat was upset, or some tracker lost his precarious footing and fell into the flood. The watchman on the police boat, which was moored close to Ting's, took the incident as a matter of course. Not so Ting, who, not being accustomed to these stern alarums, rushed to the head of the boat armed with a boat-hook, and eagerly looked out over the rushing waters. Another wild scream drew his attention to a direction in which he dimly descried a living object being borne rapidly along towards his boat. With nervous energy he awaited its approach, and as it passed he deftly caught the dress of the woman, as it now turned out to be, with the boat-hook. Mrs Ting and Green-jade stood by breathless, watching his manœuvres; and as he dragged the sufferer alongside, they caught hold of her, and by their united efforts pulled her on board.

"Is she alive?" asked Green-jade, pale and trembling with excitement.

"She was a minute or two ago," said Mrs Ting. "But don't waste time by asking questions. Chafe her hands while I rub her chest, and maybe she will recover."

"I hope I did not make that bump on her forehead," put in Ting.

"No, you did not touch her face," said his wife; "that must have been done by a blow against one of the rocks in the river. See! she breathes. I am so glad. Now, if we can only get her comfortably to bed, we may bring her round. Do you carry her to Green-jade's bed, and I will get her wet clothes off, poor thing."

Tenderly Ting bore the apparently lifeless form to Green-jade's cabin, and left her to the care of the two women.

That she was alive was all that could be said, and it was hours before she woke to consciousness.

"Where am I?" she murmured, as she opened her eyes.

"With friends," answered Green-jade, "who are going to take care of you until you are quite well. And now take a little of this hot wine which I have for you."

"He did not mean to do it," she wandered on, having taken Green-jade's kindly dose; "I am sure he did not. It was an accident—quite an accident;" and having said this, she dropped off into a sound sleep.

From an inspection of Pearl's clothes, Mrs Ting and Green-jade had come to the conclusion that she belonged to the official class; but it was late the

next day before she was sufficiently coherent to explain her immersion. With this explanation, in which she did all she could to shield her husband, came the announcement of who she was, and Green-jade recognised in her the bride of her faithless lover. By degrees the whole truth came out, partly in consequence of the explanation required to account for her rooted objection to return to her husband, and partly in response to the confidences which Green-jade imparted to her. A warm attachment sprang up between the two women, which had for its central point their abhorrence of Wang's ungrateful and cruel conduct. Before they reached Ch'ung K'ing they had sworn eternal sisterhood; and Ting, in whose eyes also Pearl had found favour, had formally adopted her as his daughter.

The fact of the rescue was kept a profound secret outside the boat, and Ting, his wife, and Green-jade were the only people who were aware of Pearl's identity. On landing at Ch'ung K'ing, Pearl went with the other ladies of the household to the Intendant's *yamuñ*, and not a word was breathed as to the way in which she had entered their household.

The first duty Ting had to perform was to make the acquaintance of his subordinates, and amongst others that of Wang. That gentleman had not quite recovered from the shock to his nerves occasioned by the tragedy in the boat, and indeed it had been prolonged by the heavy doses of opium which he had since been in the habit of taking. His appearance as he presented himself before his superior officer was not prepossessing. His usual forbidding features

were distorted by mental disquiet and blurred by the effects of stimulants. For some few seconds, as he made his bows, he was unable to speak coherently, and even when seated beside his host he found Ting's searching gaze so disconcerting that he had great difficulty in expressing himself. Altogether, Ting's report to his wife of his interview was not in Wang's favour, although he had to admit that one or two classical allusions which he had succeeded in making showed a scholarly training.

Before Pearl had been domesticated at the Intendant's *yamun* many days she opened communication with Peony through a discreet servant, who brought that faithful maid to the *yamun*, without divulging by the way more than was absolutely necessary. Peony's surprise and delight when she saw her mistress safe and sound were overwhelming. She cried and laughed, and became quite hysterical in her joy. But the account she brought of the life which she and her fellow-voyagers had led for some days after the eventful night was terrible. Wang's condition she described as having been little short of madness. His temper had been to the last degree irritable, and any sudden noise or unexpected intrusion into his presence had produced uncontrolled outbursts of anger. Le's influence had, according to Peony, greatly increased, and Wang evidently stood in awe of him. Suspicions of foul play had been generally entertained, and an air of doubt and reticence had pervaded the vessel.

As time wore on, however, Wang's mental and physical condition improved. He settled down to his new work at Ch'ung K'ing with zeal and dili-

gence, finding in active employment the best antidote against the reproaches of his conscience. Though having a profound contempt and dislike for him, Ting was compelled to admit that he showed considerable administrative ability in the discharge of his duties. The one fault which his superior officer had to find was that he permitted Le to levy blackmail on contractors and tradesmen in virtue of his official position. Repeated remonstrances on this subject produced no effect, Wang being afraid to offend or get rid of a man who, he instinctively felt, knew so much. At length Ting was obliged to take the matter into his own hands, and finding a strong case against the offender, he threw him into prison, and thus made it impossible for Wang any longer openly to support him.

Meanwhile rumours reached Ting that Wang was again contemplating marriage. He announced himself as a widower; and as his official position and future prospects were decidedly good, his appearance in the matrimonial market made quite a stir among the ladies at Ch'ung K'ing. This gave Ting an opportunity of carrying out a scheme which he had long had in his mind. He had felt for some time that if Wang and his wife could be brought together again in circumstances which would secure her against a repetition of wrong, it was his duty to arrange it. It now occurred to him that if he could, by offering Wang his wife in remarriage under the guise of his adopted daughter, bring this about, it would destroy the principal motive which had actuated Wang in the commission of his crime, and would give Pearl

a position which would make any ill-usage on his part impossible. After consultation with his wife, he asked Pearl to give him an interview in his study.

"Your position," he said, "has long been a cause of anxiety to me. If anything were to happen to me, you would be obliged to return to your father, and then all the circumstances connected with your tragedy would necessarily become public property. The only way out of the difficulty, so far as I can see, is that you should marry again."

"How can you, of all men in the world, propose such a thing to me? Don't you know that a faithful minister can serve only one sovereign, and a virtuous wife only one husband?"

"I expected some such answer from you. But what should you say if I married you, my adopted daughter, to Commissary Wang, who is, as I have reason to believe, looking out for a wife to supply the place of his dear departed?"

"What! remarry my own husband, and one who has attempted to murder me? Impossible."

"He attempted to murder you because you were a beggar chieftain's daughter: now you are the daughter of the Intendant of Ch'ung K'ing. He felt safe in doing it because he knew that you had no official influence, but he would not dare now to touch a hair of your head."

"But I have a horror of him."

"Remember, also, you have a duty towards him. If you let him marry some one else, what will the position of both of you be? Think it all over, and

come to me again when you have made up your mind."

Deeply Pearl pondered the matter, and long were the consultations which she held on the subject with Mrs Ting, Green-jade, and Peony. Dutifully Mrs Ting advised the course recommended by her husband. Green-jade's advice was less pronounced, and Peony was loud in her expressions of horror at the idea.

"Why, if, after once having escaped from his cruelty, you were to tempt fortune again, you would be like the rat in the fable, who, having got out of the trap with the loss of his tail, went back and lost his head. Besides, a wife ought at least to like her husband, and how could you ever endure a man who has tried to mur——"

"Hush," said Pearl, "you must not talk in that way. And did you never hear of Lady Le, the wife of an officer in Wu-te's court, who recovered the affections of her husband after years of cruel estrangement, by devotion and self-sacrifice?"

"No, I never did; and I can never believe that it can be the duty of any one to outrage nature to such an extent. Before I could go back to a man who had treated me as the Commissary has treated you, I would take an overdose of laudanum, or go on a voyage to England, or do anything else desperate in its folly."

In spite, however, of Peony's eloquence, Pearl eventually agreed to accept Ting's advice, and that gentleman arranged that his secretary should make it known privately to Wang that a proposal on his part for the hand of the Intendant's adopted daughter

would be favourably received. Wang was delighted at the hint. He felt that such a marriage would put him at once at an advantage. Already Ting's position was illustrious, and his abilities and influence were such that it was beyond question that before long he would be within reach of the highest offices of the State. How different, he thought, was his present condition from that in which he had been glad to marry the beggar chief's daughter! Filled with delight at the prospect before him, he lost no time in opening negotiations, and had just sent off the bridal presents, when a note from Ting informed him that, owing to his wife's serious illness, the marriage would have to be postponed. A few days later a further notice reached him of the fatal conclusion of the illness. "The Fates," wrote Ting, "have snapped the thread of her life, and I am left alone like a stork in the desert. I fear that it will be necessary for you to postpone plucking the plum-blossom[1] for a while."

Wang was loud in his condolences, and was quite content to wait, so long as he felt sure of the alliance. Indeed the affliction which had overtaken Ting was rather gratifying to him than otherwise. The sudden death of so great a lady was naturally a subject of general gossip, and the reflected notoriety which Wang enjoyed, as the intended son-in-law of the deceased, pleased him not a little. He waited patiently, therefore, during the six months required of him, and was not the least annoyed when he received an intimation, towards the end of that time,

[1] A poetical expression for marrying.

that for certain private reasons the Intendant wished for a still further postponement for three months. The fact being that, for the due management of his household, he was about, as he told Wang in confidence, "to take as my second wife a relative of the late Mrs Ting, one Green-jade, who, for some time, has been a member of my household, and who is in happy possession of all the virtues." He further proposed that the two weddings should take place on the same day, when, as he wrote, "in the words of the great T'ang poet—

> 'Two happy pairs shall taste the richest joy,
> And welcome pleasure 'reft of all alloy.'"

To this proposal Wang readily assented. To share a marriage-feast with so high and exalted an officer as the Intendant filled his soul with delight. He revelled in the thought of the contrast between his condition as a poor penniless scholar at K'aifêng Fu and his present state, and he compared with pride the splendour of his proposed marriage with the ignominy which attached to his former alliance. His mind scarcely reverted to the midnight scene in the boat. He had written to tell Mr Chu of "the sad event," and had received in reply a piteous letter full of grief, and then, so far as he was concerned, the matter had ended. He was not of an imaginative turn of mind; and so soon as all danger to himself had disappeared, his spirits revived, and his mind recovered its wonted serenity. Le was the only man who could bring evidence against him, and he was fast bound in prison, and was, if report said rightly, likely to exchange his cell for the execution-ground. He

therefore prepared the wedding-presents with a light heart, and penned the following epistle to accompany them :—

"With joy and humility I rejoice that your Excellency has deigned to give your consent to the marriage of your beloved one with me. The approach of the time when I may taste of the feathery verdure of the matrimonial peach fills me with delight, and I trust that our union may establish an alliance between our two families which shall stand as firm as the heavenly tripod. I send herewith some mean and paltry presents, which I pray your Excellency to receive."

"Prostrate," wrote the Intendant in reply, "I received your honourable presents; and I look forward with pleasure to the time when the red cords of Destiny[1] shall bind your feet to those of my despicable daughter. I am heartily ashamed to send the accompanying paltry gifts in exchange for your magnificent presents; but I beg you to excuse my deficiencies. On the 15th of next month I shall await the arrival of your jade chariot, and the emblematic geese[2] will be ready prepared in my mean dwelling."

As the wedding-day drew near, Pearl became more and more anxious as to the wisdom of the step she was about to take; and if it had not been for the support she received from Ting, she would even at the eleventh hour have evaded the engagement. Green-jade, in whom the love she had borne towards Wang was turned to bitterest contempt and hate,

[1] Destiny, it is believed, binds the feet of those who are to be united in marriage with red cords.

[2] Geese are the emblems of conjugal fidelity.

could not cordially recommend her former rival to take upon herself again the yoke which had proved so uncongenial, and Peony had no words in which to express her disapproval of the arrangement.

"I would as soon hold out my head under the executioner's knife as marry that man again, if I were you, madam."

"He has probably seen the errors of his ways by this time," said Pearl, "and will, I have no doubt, make a good husband in the future."

"The proverb says, 'The body may be healed, but the mind is incurable,'" replied Peony; "and until I see a leopard change its spots, I will not believe that that mean and cruel man can ever be reformed."

"Well, perhaps it was my fault," said Pearl, "that he was not better at first. Besides, he will no longer have Le to lead him astray. I will cap your proverb with the saying, 'A yielding tongue endures'; and as I intend to be yielding in everything, I have every confidence that Wang will turn out as good as he has been bad."

"One more proverb and I have done," said Peony. "'Ivory does not come from a rat's mouth.' But as you have made up your mind, I will say no more. I will only ask that if Mr Ting will give leave, we should follow a custom, when introducing Mr Wang into your chamber, which is common in my part of the country."

"What is that?" said Pearl.

"We make the bridegroom run the gauntlet between old women armed with switches," said Peony; "and it is such fun to see the way they run."

Ting, on being consulted, readily gave his consent to Peony's proposal, and even hinted that if *she* stood among the old women with a stouter switch than usual, he should make no objection.

"Only confine your custom to Mr Wang, if you please, Miss Peony," he added; "I have no inclination to have my shoulders switched."

On the eventful day Wang arrived dressed in canonicals, and full of that satisfaction which small minds feel at the achievement of social success. He received the congratulations of the subordinate officials with haughty condescension, and conversed affably with Ting before the ceremonies began. He went through his part with perfect composure, which is more than can be said for Pearl and Green-jade, who, if they had not been concealed behind their wedding-veils, would have broken down entirely. At last the vows having been made to Heaven, Earth, and the ancestors of the brides and bridegrooms, and the marriage-feast having been brought to a conclusion, the bridegrooms were conducted to the apartments of their brides. As Wang crossed the hall leading to his bridal chamber, a number of old women, headed by Peony, formed up in double line, and as the unconscious Wang passed between them, each drew from her ample sleeve a stick with which she belaboured the unfortunate bridegroom. It did Peony's heart good to see how the stately swagger with which he entered their ranks became a hasty flight, as the blows rained upon his shoulders. A parting blow which Peony aimed with nervous strength on his luckless head drew a cry of pain

"WANG."—*Page* 168.

from him, and he rushed headlong into his wife's room, almost tripping over the door-curtain in his haste to reach a place of safety.

Pale and breathless he stood before the veiled figure of his wife, and it was some seconds before he could sufficiently recover his nerves to raise the red veil which concealed Pearl's features. When he did so he started back with horror and amazement. The little presence of mind which remained to him deserted him entirely. He trembled all over, and putting his hand before his eyes, cried, "Take it away, take it away! What fool's trick is this?"

So saying, he turned and ran towards the door, where he encountered Ting.

"Whither away?" said that gentleman. "You run from your wife as though she were the plague. Have you had a quarrel already?"

"Let me go," replied Wang. "Either she is a ghost, or some trick has been played upon me."

"She is no ghost, but your wife Pearl, whom now for the second time you have married. Speak to your husband, lady."

"I am indeed doubly your wife," said Pearl. "And I trust that our second nuptials will be the prelude to a longer and happier wedded existence than was vouchsafed to us by the gods before."

At these words, and fortified by the presence of Ting, Wang regained enough composure to glance furtively at Pearl, the placidity and good temper of whose features bore in upon him the consciousness that he had nothing to fear from her. This conviction gave him courage.

"But how has this all happened?" he said. "Is it possible that you were saved from drowning in the rapid?"

"It is possible," said Ting. "And now let me lead you to your wife's side, and I will then leave her to explain it all."

So saying, he led him to a seat beside his wife, and then retired.

In as few words as were possible, Pearl related how she had been saved, and enlarged with warmth on the kindness she had received from Ting. Not a word of reproach did she utter, and she gave him to understand by her manner that the past was forgotten.

Tortured by a remorse which was awakened by her presence, and fearful lest Ting should take a more judicial view of his conduct than she did, Wang fell on his knees before his wife and implored her forgiveness, vowing at the same time that he would be a true and kind husband to her for the rest of his life. Pearl hastily raised him from the ground, and assured him that, so far as both she and Ting were concerned, what had happened would be as though it had never taken place. Peace was thus restored; and as with advancing night quiet took possession of the courtyards, so harmony reigned in the bridal chambers.

After ten years of most undeservedly placid married life, Wang was stricken down with fever, and in a vision of the night a spirit passed before his face. Trembling and terrified he gazed into the darkness, and though he could see nothing, he was conscious that some form stood before him. He was too fright-

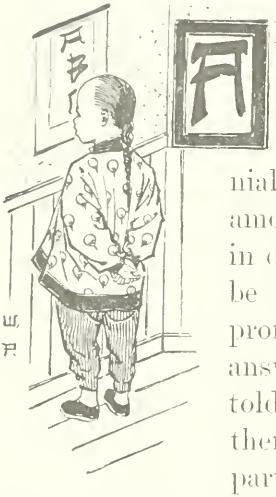
ened to cry out, and after a silence which seemed to him to last for hours, he heard a voice saying—

"According to the original decree of the God of Hades, you should have fifteen more years of life before you; but inasmuch as you have been guilty of the heinous crime of attempting to murder your wife, the thread of your existence is about to be snapped."

With these words the vision vanished, and Wang fell back unconscious. In this condition Pearl found him a few minutes later, and as the morning light broke through the lattice-window his spirit passed into the land of forgetfulness.

"*I am indeed doubly your wife.*"—Page 169.

HOW A CHINESE B.A. WAS WON.



ABOUT two centuries before the time of Abraham, the emperor who then sat upon the throne of China ordained that triennial examinations should be held among the officials of the empire, in order that the "unworthy might be degraded and the meritorious promoted to honour." The plan answered excellently well, we are told, and would probably have thenceforth become a recognised part of the machinery of government, had not evil times fallen upon the country. The peace which reigned so long as the virtuous sovereigns Shun and Yu (B.C. 2255-2197) occupied the throne, disappeared with the death of Yu, and disorder spread like a flood over the empire. In the council-chambers of the succeeding emperors, armed warriors took the place of the learned scholars who had advised their predecessors, and no examin-

ation, but such as tried the strength of their right arms and their skill in warlike fence, found favour with these soldiers of fortune for an instant.

Thus, though at intervals the nation returned to its right mind under the guidance of wise and beneficent rulers, the scheme inaugurated by Shun fell into abeyance, and it was not until nearly three thousand years later that Yang-te (A.D.) 605-617 varied the monotony of his otherwise profligate reign by reinstituting a system of examination for office. Unlike everything European, and therefore thoroughly Chinese, the highest degree was instituted first, and the lowest last. Yang-te, like Shun, began by examinations among his courtiers. His successors, arguing that what was good for the courtiers would be good for the people at large, ordained that "search should be made each year in every prefecture and district for elegant scholars and dutiful sons," who should, after satisfying the examiners, be employed in the State.

In this way were called into being the three degrees which exist at the present day—viz., the Siu-ts'ai, or Elegant Scholar; the Keu-jin, otherwise Heaou-leen, or Dutiful Son; and Tsin-sze, or Advanced Scholar, the earlier creation of Yang-te. The same books also upon which it was ordained that the candidates should be examined eleven hundred years ago, are still used for the like purpose. But as with advancing culture the number of competitors have multiplied exceedingly, it has become obviously impossible that offices should be found for all those who are successful; and the contests, especially for the lowest

degree of Siu-ts'ai, have ceased to be for anything more than the honour of the degree. Those who succeed in becoming Tsin-sze are, as a general rule, appointed at once to the mandarinate, and a Keu-jin who has influence in high quarters generally gets employment; but the degree of Siu-ts'ai does nothing more than qualify the holder for official life. Unfortunately for the chances of these pass-men, the practice of drawing all officials from the *literati* has fallen into desuetude; and to such an extent has this departure from ancient custom been carried, that nearly one-half of the mandarins of the present day have, it is said, never faced the examiners. Still the competitive examinations form the only officially recognised road to the mandarinate, and this alone is enough to keep the examiners' lists full. But, apart from this consideration, the high value which is attached by tradition to literary culture induces every one in whom glimmers the least intellectual light to tempt fortune in the examination-hall. The first ambition of every self-made man is that a son may be born to him who will reflect glory on his grey hairs by winning a degree. He feels that his acquired wealth is as nothing to him, so long as his household is without the wearer of a buttoned cap to raise it above the families of the people, and to link it with the inhabitants of *yamuns* (*i.e.*, official residences).

Such a one was Le Tai, the great salt merchant, who gave the name of Le-chia Chwang to the village where he lived. He had begun life in a very small way, having been a junior clerk in the office of a farmer of the salt *gabelle*, to whose business he

eventually succeeded. By constant perseverance, and by the help of some well-devised ventures, he gradually accumulated so considerable a fortune that, when his employer signified his intention of retiring, he was able to pay him down a good round sum for the goodwill of the business, and to set at rest some official cravings which it was necessary to satisfy before he could obtain the Salt Commissioner's seal to his appointment. Fortune had been kind also to him in his domestic relations. The two sons who grew up before him were a double assurance to him that the sacrifices at his tomb would be duly and regularly offered. He had daughters too, but they satisfied no ambition and dissipated no fear, and he laid, therefore, no great store on their existence. Not that he was an unkind father. On the contrary, he was fond of toying with his little daughters, but his heart was with his sons, Le Taou and Le Ming.

Taou had at an early age developed a taste for the counting-house, and was rapidly becoming as skilled as his father in driving bargains and defrauding the revenue. Ming, on the other hand, had, from his childhood up, displayed a studious bent of mind. When little more than an infant he would stand in the village school with his face to the wall and his hands behind his back, after the recognised fashion, and repeat, without stumbling, the "Three Character Classic" at the top of his voice, heedless of the like shrill utterances of the young Wangs and Changs who, envious of his superior attainments, declaimed in his ears their by no means perfect lessons. From such promising beginnings he made rapid strides in

his studies, until, as he now boasts, he could say with Confucius that "at fifteen he bent his mind to learning." Under the guidance of a tutor, whose title to teach consisted only in the fact of his having, after many ineffectual efforts, taken the lowest degree of Siu-ts'ai some twenty years before, he made himself master of the "Five Classics" and "Four Books," and could talk with equal fluency on the eight diagrams of Fuh-he, the doctrine of the "Superior Man," and the excellences of the "Mother of Mencius." His acquaintance with the interpretations put upon these texts by every scholar, from K'ung Ying-ta to Yuen Yuen, was profound; and his knowledge of rites and ceremonies was such as to put to shame his less cultured father and brother. His scrupulous attention to every deferential observance inculcated in the rites of Chow proclaimed him a scholar, but marked him in their minds as a prig. He was not a lively companion, for his studies, instead of making him think or rousing his imagination, had only stored his mind with philosophical platitudes and well-worn truisms. But as the accumulation of a good stock of these was essential to enable him to pass the examination which would make him a possible mandarin, his friends put up with his references to Confucius and the other sages, and allowed themselves to be bored to death with his odes and essays. It was quite a relief to them, however, when, as the examination drew near, he betook himself to a summer-house in the garden, whither he carried his books and "the four precious things" of a scholar's study — viz., pencil, paper, ink, and inkslab. Here he spent his

days and a great part of his nights in learning by heart the Nine Classics, laboriously conning the commentaries, and getting up the contents of the rhyming dictionaries. Once or twice he allowed himself to be enticed by his *quondam* schoolfellows, Wang and Chang, who also hoped to face the Literary Chancellor, into a picnic up the river to a Buddhist monastery embosomed in trees among the mountains. On these occasions the friends, as became scholars, lightened their feast by making couplets; and as he who failed in his task had to drink three cups of wine, it not unfrequently happened that Ming was, on the morning after such expeditions, more fit for his bed than his books. When he declared his intention of giving up these merry-makings as interfering with his work, his friends laughed at him, and confided to him their intention of smuggling "sleeve" editions of the classics into the examination-hall, plaited in their queues, and advised him to do the same. But Ming, though inclined at first to yield to the temptation, refused, and went back to his summer-house and his books. From these nothing now withdrew him—not even the artifices of Kin Leen, the pretty waiting-maid of Miss Ling next door, who one day threw over the wall, so as to fall in front of his study window, a stone with a bit of paper tied to it. Ming picked it up, and found the paper to contain a couplet, which it did not require his deep reading to discover was an invitation to him to take the reverse direction of the stone. But he crunched the note in his hand and buried his face in the 'Book of Changes.'

"Ming picked it up, and found the paper to contain a couplet."

But soon the time came when he thought himself ripe for examination for the degree of Siu-ts'ai; so one morning he presented himself at the Le-fang department of the magistrate's *yamun* in the neighbouring city, and demanded of the secretary in charge the conditions under which he could appear at the next ordeal. "First of all," said the secretary, who was not in a good humour that morning, "if you are the son of an actor, or a servant, it is no use your coming, for such people are not allowed to compete at all. But if you are not, you must send us, in writing, your name and age, your place of residence, the names of your father, your mother, your grandfather and grandmother, your great-grandfather and great-grandmother. And further, you must give us a description of your appearance, the colour of your complexion, and whether you have any hair on your face. And now I must attend to other business."

Acting on this hint, Ming made his bow, and as soon as he got home he sat down to supply the information required of him. He had some difficulty in going as far back as his great-grandparents, and when he came to the question of the colour of his complexion he hesitated, and would have liked to describe it as white, but after consulting the glass he saw the truth was too obvious, so he wrote "yellow." Armed with this paper, he returned to the *yamun*, and when it had been examined and pronounced satisfactory, he was allowed to take away a packet of examination paper. Each morning after this he walked into the city and past the *yamun*, in the hope of seeing the official notice fixing the date of the next examination.

At last, one day, as he turned the corner of the principal street, he saw a crowd at the *yamun* gate, standing before a fresh placard. In his excitement he forgot for a moment the Confucian maxim, never to walk quickly, and he had almost broken into a run before the recollection of the words of the sage steadied his pace. As he came up, Wang met him with a face full of excitement: "His Honour has appointed the 5th of next month," said he; "so we have now got ten more days for work, and as I have been rather idle of late I shall go straight home and make up for lost time."

Ming scarcely heard what he said, but pushed into the crowd to read for himself the notification. True enough, it was as Wang had reported. The 5th was to be the day, and full of his tidings Ming went home to give the news to his parents. From that time he was treated with the consideration due to one who is about to take his first great step in life, and, as the excitement prevented his working, he spent most of his time in visiting those of his friends who were to be among his competitors, and talking over with them their respective chances. One thing filled him with alarm. As the day drew near he learned that he was to be one of upwards of two thousand competitors for the degrees.

Daylight on the 5th saw crowds of students on their way to the Kaopêng-tsze, or examination-hall, in the magistrate's *yamun*. As soon as they had all assembled the doors were thrown open at the upper end of the hall, and the magistrate entered and seated himself at a table covered with red cloth, on which

were arranged pencils, inkstones, and paper, and at which also sat the secretaries who were to assist in the examination. Presently, amid a deathlike silence, a notice-board was displayed, on which it was announced that the work for the day would consist of an essay on the passage from the Lun-yu: "The Master said, 'Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?'" another essay on the passage, also from the Lun-yu: "A youth should overflow with love for all men;" and a poem on "Wine," after the manner of the poets of the T'ang dynasty.

Instantly two thousand pencils were seized by as many nervous and eager hands, and the work of the day began. Fortunately for Ming, the commentator's remarks on the first passage were tolerably fresh in his recollection, so that he was able to start off without delay. "Learning," he wrote, "is only the first step towards perfection, and he who desires to become a superior man must strive daily to improve his knowledge and perfect his understanding. But the Master's words have also a wider signification. They are intended to impress upon us that in every concern we undertake we must not only begin, but must also make an end. It is better not to begin a matter than, having begun, to leave it unfinished. But let us further consider this text. It is with the whole body that we pursue after an object, but it is with the heart that we accomplish it. Let us therefore try to keep our hearts pure and our intentions sincere, and we shall then be able to do great things. But how are we to keep our hearts pure?" And then he went on with some very

excellent Confucianism to answer his own question, and brought his essay to a conclusion with a eulogy on the supreme wisdom of the text.

Flushed with his first success, he took up his second paper; but his views, or rather those he had imbibed from the commentators Chu He, Ch'ing Hao, and others, were not so clearly defined on the love with which a youth should regard all men, as on the first text. However, he began: "In this passage it is important to bear in mind the distinction the Master would draw between the love of a youth and the love of a full-grown man. A youth brought up within his father's house has no experience of the world, and has not arrived at that knowledge when it is safe for him to hate as a man should hate, or love as a man should love. The Master said that he hated those who spoke evil of others, those who slandered their superiors, and those who were forward and violent, and, at the same time, of contracted understanding. It is fitting, therefore, that men should rightly hate as well as rightly love. But how can a youth who is still unlearned decide for himself whom to love and whom to hate? Therefore the Master says he should love all men." Here his memory failed him, and as he was incapable of any original thought, he would have had to lay down his pencil had it not occurred to him that he might drag into his essay a panegyric on the love of children for their parents. The idea was a happy one, and enabled him to complete the required number of lines before poor Wang, who sat near him, had done much more than write down the text.

But the poem he felt to be a more serious matter than either of the essays. Fortunately the subject was one upon which his favourite author Le Tai-pĭh had repeatedly written, and finding that he had still plenty of time before him, he shut his eyes and tried to recall to his recollection the praises which that great wine-loving poet had lavished on the bottle. Gradually his memory summoned up lines and parts of lines and conventional expressions in sufficient quantity to enable him to begin the mosaic, which he was fully aware must make up any poetical effusion on his part. After much "ploughing with the pencil" and long mental struggles, he wrote as follows :—

"When o'er the village shines the evening sun,
And silent stand the tombs of bygone men,
When birds sing evening chant beside the way,
Then sit you down to drink your perfumed wine.
The men of old did quickly pass the flask,
And sharp of wit did improvise their songs,
Then youths were only bidden to the feasts
Who drained their goblets to the latest drop."

With this final effort his work for the day was over, and he returned home with the happy consciousness that he had done well. For the benefit of his anxious friends he had to fight his mental battle o'er again, and he retired to bed to dream of honours lost and won; and just as he imagined himself introduced into the imperial presence as *Chwang-yuen*, or first literate of the year, he was roused by his father, who came to tell him that the morning was breaking, and that it was time to be up and stirring. The sun had scarcely risen on the earth

when he found himself once again in the examination-hall surrounded by his fellow-competitors of yesterday. Again the magistrate took his seat at the table, and without further preface it was announced that the work for that day, which would be the last of that examination, would consist of three essays: one on the passage from the Le Ke—"Tsze-shang's mother died, and he did not mourn for her. His father's disciples therefore asked of Tsze-sze, 'In bygone days did not Confucius mourn for his divorced mother?'" Another on the text from the Classic of Filial Piety: "The Master said, 'Formerly the intelligent kings served their fathers with filial piety, and therefore they served heaven with intelligence; they served their mothers with filial piety, and therefore they served earth with discrimination.'" And a third upon the passage from the Sing-le or Mental Philosophy of Chu He: "Water belongs to the female principle of nature, yet it has its root in the male; fire belongs to the male principle, yet it has its root in the female."

By the time the papers were handed in Ming felt that he had written three fairly good essays. On several occasions during the day his attention had been attracted to his next neighbour, an old man, whose trembling hand seemed scarcely able to trace the characters he wished to write. His ideas also evidently flowed slowly, and Ming had several times longed to be able to offer him suggestions. How much they were needed was obvious from the unfinished state of the papers the old scholar handed in at the close of the day, and his dejected mien as

he left the hall showed that he was painfully conscious of his shortcomings. But, truth to tell, the feeling that he had done well soon drove the recollection of the veteran out of Ming's mind, and he hurried home to satisfy the eager expectancy of his parents with the tale of his exploits. He knew, however, that his success would have to remain problematical until the publication of the lists in two or three days' time; and he wisely determined to give himself the rest which he felt he needed, and not to attempt to read for the second five-day examination, which he knew he would have to face almost immediately if his name should now appear in the charmed circle of successful competitors.

On the third day he went into the city to see if by chance the lists were published, and found the streets thronged by his associates, who had come on the same fruitless errand as himself. As, after mid-day, there was no hope of his anxieties being set at rest before the morrow, he allowed himself to be tempted by some of his fellow-students to join them in a picnic to a suburban garden, where the pleasure-seekers amused themselves by extemporising couplets and drinking wine among the flowers. Towards evening the fun grew fast and furious, and Ming found it necessary at last to retreat to a secluded summer-house to sleep off the effects of his potations before returning home. His debauch, however, did not prevent his being in the city early the next morning, as it had been reported among his *convives* of the previous evening that the lists would be out soon after daybreak. On entering the gates he was met by a

candidate, by whose excited appearance Ming saw at once that his fate was sealed one way or the other. "The lists are out," said his friend, "and my name is in the circle." "I congratulate you," answered Ming, "and may you rise to office and reap emoluments! But where does my name appear?" "I had not time to look," said his friend as he hurried on. With all possible speed Ming made his way to the magistrate's *yamun*, outside the walls of which he saw an excited crowd gathered round a long strip of paper, covered for the most part with names written perpendicularly, but having at one end a circle composed of the centrifugally written names of those who had passed best. When fairly within sight of the paper which was to resolve his doubts, Ming suddenly felt an inclination to slacken his pace and to look in at the shop-windows. At last, however, he made his way into the crowd, and had just discovered his name in the circle when an acquaintance cried out, "Ah! Le Laou-ye,[1] I congratulate you. My name is only two from yours. But I am afraid our poor friend Wang is left out in the cold." "I am sorry for that," replied Ming, "but let me congratulate you on your success. Have you heard when the second examination is to be held?" "In two days' time. May you become a *chwang-yuen!* Good-bye." "And may you have a seat at the Feast of the Blowing of the Deer!"[2] replied Ming, as he hurried off homewards to announce his good fortune.

At the news of his son's success the old salt mer-

[1] A complimentary title equivalent to "your worship."

[2] A feast given to the graduates at the provincial examinations.

chant's joy knew no bounds, and he instantly issued invitations for a feast on the next afternoon in commemoration of the event. In the meantime the house was besieged by friends—more especially poor ones—who came to congratulate Ming, and who exhausted every good wish it was possible to devise for his future happiness and advancement. In the estimation of his mother and sisters his success had already raised him on a pinnacle of fame; and, after their first burst of joy was over, his mother reminded him that a go-between had been to her several times to propose a marriage for him with Miss Yang, the daughter of an ex-Prefect living in the neighbourhood; "and now that you are on the fair road to office," added she, "do let me authorise her to open negotiations." "Let us wait until I have made a name for myself by taking my degree," answered her son, "and then I will obey your wishes in that as in all other respects."

In the pleasurable enjoyment of being made much of, the two days' interval passed quickly to Ming, and the morning of the third day found him seated again in the magistrate's hall, surrounded by all his former competitors, with the exception of a few whose names had figured so near the tail of the long straight list that they had recognised the hopelessness of competing any more. The same old man who had excited his compassion at the first examination was there, however, looking excited and nervous. Ming was now the more sorry for him, as he had recognised his name almost last upon the list; but the entrance of the magistrate presently drove all thoughts but those on the subjects before him out of his head.

This examination, it was announced, was, as usual, to last five days. The course on each of the first four days was to consist of an essay on a text taken from the 'Four Books,' as well as of a poem. On the third day an ode on a given subject was to be optional, and on the fourth day an opportunity was promised to aspiring candidates of writing additional poems. On the fifth day the work was to consist only of half an essay on a theme from the 'Four Books.'

At this examination Ming worked with varying success. His profound knowledge of the classics and the writings of the commentators stood him in good stead, and his constant study of the T'ang dynasty poets was amply rewarded by the way in which they honoured his drafts on them to meet his poverty of ideas. The ode on the third day, which was "On the Pleasure men take in talking of the Signs of the Seasons," exercised his imagination to the utmost. Thrice he put pencil to paper, and as often he tore to shreds his lines. The fourth time he wrote as follows, and, as the hour of closing was drawing near, he handed the result in with his other compositions:—

> "When the belated guest his host reseeks,
> And cloudless skies proclaim the close of day,
> 'Tis sweet to talk of treacherous weather past,
> And watch the dying sun's effulgent ray."

Ming was no poet, but even he felt that his lines lacked freshness of ideas and vigour of diction. He was conscious, however, of having made one or two happy turns in the rhymes, which, truth to tell, were borrowed from some old published examination papers;

but, knowing the somewhat pedantic literary taste of the magistrate, he founded some hopes upon them. And he was right. After a few days of suspense his name appeared on the walls of the *yamun*, high up in the list of successful candidates. Again the rejoicings at Le-chia Chwang were repeated, and again congratulations poured in upon him from all sides. Even the ex-Prefect, upon whose daughter Mrs Le was keeping her eye, deemed the occasion of sufficient importance to warrant a note, which he sent, accompanied with a red-lacquer tray full of dainty dishes and luscious sweets, some of which Mrs Le shrewdly suspected had been prepared by the delicate fingers of Miss Yang. This was the most gratifying recognition that Ming had as yet received, and he took the letter from the servant reverentially in both hands. Eagerly he tore open the envelope, and read as follows:—

"In ancient times men's merits were judged by the speed with which they chased a deer, the fleetest of foot winning the prize. But now the way to fame is bridged by learning, and for many years it has been my fate to speed and bid farewell to old friends like yourself, who fly on the wings of success to the capital. Of all the batches of brilliant scholars who have ever passed at these examinations, I hear that that to which you have lent your countenance, and which has now entered the epidendrum city[1] of the learned, is the most conspicuous. Humbly I offer you the paltry things which with this letter I lay at your feet, and respectfully long for the sound of the gold fastening of your response."

[1] *I.e.*, the joyous company.

Scarcely had Ming replied to this flattering epistle when a messenger arrived with an invitation from the magistrate to dinner on the following day. As it was in accordance with immemorial usage that the successful candidates should be entertained by the magistrate, this summons was no surprise to so keen a student of rites and ceremonies as Ming; and on the next afternoon he went in a sedan-chair to the *yamun*, fully prepared for the company he found assembled there. But he was much flattered by the way in which the magistrate received him. "Your honourable essays are genuine pearls of literature," said his host, "and you are possessed of a supply of classical knowledge which cannot but gain you admittance to the Dragon (*i.e.*, imperial) presence." "Your honour overrates the mean pencil-scratchings of this dullard, and allows the reflection of your lofty genius to brighten the inelegancies of his wretched compositions," replied Ming. This speech he had carefully prepared as he came along in his chair, on the chance of his having to reply to a complimentary greeting. His fellow-students, however, being unaware of his forethought, sang aloud their praises of his readiness as they sat down to the feast. Before starting, Mrs Le had strictly enjoined Ming to bring back an account of the good things he was to partake of, and in obedience to her orders he stored his memory with the following list of dishes:—

Bêche de mer; stewed duck, served with force-meat; birds'-nest soup; hashed pigeon, with ham; stewed crabs; fried black fish; stewed mutton, with

bamboo shoots; fowl and ham; turtle-soup; hashed dog; stewed black cat; fried rat; macaroni-soup; salt fish; salted eggs; minced pork; basins of rice; and an infinite variety of fruits and sweets.

Before beginning, the magistrate poured out a libation, and without more ado the guests set to work at the good things before them. The wine circulated freely, and lent material aid to the magistrate in his endeavours to set every one at his ease. To Ming the magistrate showed marked attention, and with his own chopsticks carried a fine slug from the dish to the lips of the favoured guest, a compliment which made quite a stir among the other scholars. Not far from Ming, but apart from every one, sat the old student whom he had noticed in the examination-hall, but whose want of success scarcely entitled him to a seat at the feast. Some such remark Ming made to the magistrate, who explained that each year a certain number of degrees were given away to plucked old students, and that he was going to recommend his guest for one on this occasion. After dinner Ming made a point of congratulating the old man, who in quavering accents made a pedantically complimentary reply, every word of which was taken from the 'Four Books.' Wang, Ming noticed, was not among the invited, and the magistrate told him that though there were clever thoughts and much sound reasoning in his essays, yet it was too plain that his knowledge of the texts of the classics and the views of the commentators were not sufficiently thorough to pass him, and that therefore he had been obliged to advise him to come up again next time.

From private sources Ming heard that Wang was sorely disappointed at his want of success, so the next morning he wrote him the following note of condolence: "The decayed willows on the Sin-ting Pass sent forth a sweet savour, and rotten T'ung trees delighted Tsai Yung[1] with their melody. If a jewel be encased in a hidden casket, it is not every sword which can cleave it so as to display the jewels[2] found by Pien Ho on the King Mountain, or the pearls snatched by the Earl Suy from the serpent's head. Who can explain the lofty talents enjoyed by some, or account for the meaner abilities bestowed on others? We are as we are made, and there is no helping ourselves." To this kindly epistle Wang sent reply:—

"Well may I adopt the lines of Chang Shu as my chant—

> 'A thousand miles o'er sea and fields
> I have followed at your horse's heels;
> I have travelled over hill and dale,
> And now have missed the dragon's scale.'[3]

Gratefully I acknowledge your sympathetic words, in which I recognise the lofty nature which has en-

[1] A celebrated scholar and musician of the second century. It is recorded of him that while seated at the fireside of a friend in the State of Wu, his attention was attracted to the sounds emitted from a log of a T'ung tree which was burning on the hearth, and declaring that its tone gave promise of rare excellence, he converted it into a lute.

[2] A block of jade which, being believed to be spurious, was rejected by two emperors in succession, the last of whom condemned Pien Ho (eighth century B.C.) to lose his left foot as an impostor. The next emperor, however, perceiving the genuineness of the stone, graciously accepted it, and offered Pien Ho a title of nobility, which he declined.

[3] *I.e.*, "And now have missed taking my degree." The idea, a poetical one, being that a successful scholar resembles a soaring dragon.

abled you to overcome all the difficulties in your path. Though incapable through grief to write, I fear to return you a verbal message. As night approaches my sorrow almost seems to weigh me down, and I wrap myself in a cattle cloak, after the manner of Wang Chang,[1] and weep bitter tears. What else is left for me to do?"

Ming knew that he would now have a respite of two or three months before the time came for him to be examined by the Prefect, as a preliminary to his going up for his final examinations before the Literary Chancellor. He retired therefore again to his summer-house, and devoted himself to a renewed study of the books which had already served him so well. As the day drew near, his father wrote to an old friend at the prefectural city, asking him to receive his son for the examination, and, in response to a cordial invitation which was returned, Ming mounted his mule one morning at daybreak, and started off on his momentous journey. Late in the evening he reached the hospitable door of his father's friend, and woke the next morning, after a sound sleep, refreshed and ready for the work before him. After eating a hasty breakfast, he hurried off to the *yamun* of the Literary Chancellor, and arrived only just in time, for he had scarcely got into the hall when a gun was fired as a signal for the fast closing of the doors. The arrangements he found to be in all respects similar to those at the magistrate's *yamun*, and the subjects for examination were taken from the

[1] A well-known character, who, after enduring great poverty, afterwards became a metropolitan magistrate.

same books, the only difference being that the Prefect's more liberal mind was reflected in the texts he had chosen for the essays. With each of his five days' work Ming was fairly satisfied, and when the examination was over he waited with some acquired confidence for the publication of the result. The appearance of his name, however, in the first flight of successful competitors was none the less a delight to him, and he sent off an express messenger to Le-chia Chwang to proclaim his success to his parents. "Your stupid son," he added, "is but waiting to obey the invitation sent him by his Excellency the Prefect to dinner to-morrow before hastening to your honourable dwelling to throw himself at your feet." The dinner at the Prefect's was very much a repetition of that given by the magistrate, except that there was a marked weeding out in point of numbers. The reputation which Ming had brought with him for scholarship, and which he had just maintained, ensured him friendly notice at the hand of the Prefect, who, however, did not seem much to relish his stilted style of conversation and his Confucius-or-nothing train of thought. Before the students parted their host announced that, as usual, he should send the seat numbers and not the names of the successful competitors to the Literary Chancellor, who would hold the final examinations on that day month in that city.

The next day Ming went home, and was met at the entrance of the village by a number of his associates, who greeted him with cries of congratulation. The welcome he received from his immediate family was especially joyous, and for days a succession of visitors

poured in upon him to offer their felicitations on his marked and sustained success. Under such agreeable circumstances he took little heed of time, and almost before Ming was aware he was reminded that it was time to betake himself again to the prefectural city. The merchant who had been his host on the previous occasion was glad enough once more to open his doors to a scholar who was already winning for himself eminence; and though he cared little for his companionship, preferring lively and suggestive conversation to dull platitudes and measured periods, he paid him marked deference, as one to whom the door of office, the highest object of ambition, would soon be opened.

The ordeal Ming was now called upon to face was more terrible to him than any of the other examinations had been. Up to this time he had presented himself only before the local officials, men whom he had constantly seen, and with whom he was in a sense familiar. Besides, hitherto the contests had been but preliminary, whereas the examinations in which he had now to compete were either to make or to mar him, at all events temporarily; and the examiner was surrounded with all the dignity and awe of an unknown great personage. It was with no slight trepidation, therefore, that he took his seat again on stool No. 33, by which number he was known for the time being. As soon as the gun was fired and the door shut, the Chancellor entered. As he approached the table, all rose, and every eye was turned towards the man in whose hands their fate rested. He was of medium height, and a plump figure, with a round good-natured face, a pair of small twinkling eyes, and a long scanty

moustache. After bowing politely to the students, he seated himself at the table and straightway proclaimed on the notice-board that on this occasion he should require from them two essays on the texts from the 'Four Books': "The Master said, 'It is by the odes that the mind is aroused; it is by the rules of propriety that the character is established; and it is from music that the finish is received.'" And, "When a ruler sympathises in his people's joys, they take pleasure in his rejoicings; and when he shares their sorrows, they sympathise with his griefs." And a poem on the "Pleasure of hearing the notes of a distant lute amid the sound of drippings from the roof on a wet day."

Ming was too nervous to collect his thoughts and set his memory at work at once, and it was some time before he put pencil to paper. But when he did, he made fair progress, and at the end of the day he had the satisfaction of knowing that if his essays contained no new or striking thoughts, they were at all events thoroughly orthodox, and that the sentences were framed in accordance with the rules laid down by some of the best-known essayists. He was rather disappointed, therefore, to find, when the list of eighty optimes came out, that "Thirty-three" was barely within the first forty. This was the first check of any kind which he had met with, and it alarmed him; for he gathered from it that the Commissioner did not take the same favourable view of his literary matter and manner as the magistrate and prefect had done. It was with a sobered countenance, therefore, that he took his seat again for the second trial. This

time several themes were given out from the 'Four Books,' upon which the students were expected to compose half essays. To these Ming devoted his best energies, and was rewarded by finding his number published two days later in the circle of successful competitors.

Having recovered some confidence from this result, Ming took his seat in the hall, on the morning after the publication of the lists, with some assurance. The comparatively small number of competitors, which had been reduced to eighty, or just double the number of degrees competed for, by the Chancellor, gave a silent and business-like air to the assembly. On this occasion the candidates wrote an essay on a text from the 'Four Books,' one on a text from the 'Five Classics,' and a poem. At the close of the day's work the Commissioner announced that after examining the papers he should, as was customary, write to the Prefect for the names of the best men, whom at present he only knew by their numbers, and should at once publish them. "And I have arranged," he added, "that the first competitors from the other districts shall meet you here in ten days' time finally to compete for the degrees." The next few days were spent by Ming in a fever of suspense, which the complimentary speeches of his merchant host were quite ineffectual to allay. To fail now, he felt, would be a terrible blow both to his fortunes and to his pride. What would all his friends say? and what would, above all, the ex-prefect Yang say? However, fortune was kinder to him than his forebodings, and once again he saw with triumph his name among

the number of the successful. On this occasion his pleasure was all the greater, since he felt that now he was practically sure of his degree. The final examination spoken of by the Commissioner would, he knew, consist only of a test of his knowledge of the text of the sixteen "Sacred Edicts" of the Emperor K'ang-he, and of "the Amplification" of the same by his son and successor, Yung-Ching. On this point he felt that he could trust his memory to carry him through, for had he not in his study at Le-chia Chwang repeated them over and over again by heart without missing a character? However, to make assurance doubly sure, he devoted some hours of each of the succeeding days to conning them over. On the appointed morning at daybreak he made his way to the Chancellor's hall, where he found assembled his fellow pass-men, together with the picked competitors from the other four districts of the prefecture. There was a semi-holiday air about them all, as though they looked on this trial more as a formality than anything else. The Commissioner, too, entered the hall with a lighter step, and his voice had a cheery tone in it as he ordered the announcement to be made that the morning's work would consist of writing out from memory the seventh edict of the Beneficent Emperor K'ang-he, beginning "Chu e twan," "Flee strange doctrines," with the "Amplification" of the same by his august and intelligent son Yung-Ching.

Fortunately for Ming, this particular edict had been frequently in evidence lately at Le-chia Chwang with reference to the foreign missionary question, which

was beginning to disturb that otherwise quiet district. The passage in the "Amplification," *Yew ju se-yang keao tsung T'een chu, yih shuh puh king*—"As to the religion of the Western foreigner which exalts the Lord of Heaven, it is also contrary to our sacred books," &c.—had been constantly quoted in opposition to the proselytising zeal of the missionaries, and the context had been carefully studied by village Confucianists. His task was therefore a comparatively light one, and when he put down his pencil, he felt assured that he had not missed one of the six hundred and forty characters composing the extract. Shortly after noon he walked into his host's family hall, and with so jaunty a step that it needed no words of his to assure his entertainer that he was speaking to a Siu-ts'ai almost *in esse*. It now only remained for him to await the public notification of the final result of the series of examinations which he had gone through during the last two months. On the third day this was published, and the local world was made acquainted with the fact that Le Ming, together with thirty-nine others from the same district, had obtained the degree of Siu-ts'ai. So soon as Ming had despatched a letter with the news to his father, and received the congratulations of his merchant host, he hurried off to one of the first tailors in the city to order the canonicals belonging to his newly acquired honour.

The next day, as in duty bound, the newly made Siu-ts'ais went at the recognised hour to pay their respects to the Chancellor, who received them graciously, and entertained them on tea and sweets, while a band

in the courtyard enlivened the company with inspiriting music. Ming was not musical, but even he could not help recognising that well-known and deservedly popular air, "The Autumn Tints stretch across the Sky," and when the musicians struck up the first bars—

he could not resist humming to himself the picturesque refrain—

"Yao loh ch'iu t'ung,
Ngai nan chih hwei tsui,
Yuen k'e tsan t'ung,
Hao chang shuy k'e kung chwang t'un."

There was one more prescribed ceremony to be gone through before he could return home. On the afternoon following the visit to the Chancellor's, the same gay company went to worship at the temple of Confucius, where, after having prostrated themselves before the image of the Sage, they partook of a feast spread in the courtyard at the expense of the city. Towards evening the scene became one of revelry, and the amount of wine consumed as forfeits in the game of Mora sent many of the guests to bed with

"very red cheeks," to "get up very white in the morning." When Ming reached his host's, he found his canonicals had arrived from the tailor's, and, tired though he was, he could not resist the pleasure of trying them on. Early dawn saw him again before the looking-glass, and after a hasty breakfast, he set off for Le-chia Chwang amid the congratulations and good wishes of the worthy merchant and his family. In the evening he reached his home, and when he walked into the family hall, bearing on his person the insignia of his success, his father fairly wept with delight. Nor were the other members of the family less demonstrative as with one consent they offered their congratulations, and expressed their admiration of the becoming and dignified dress which it was now his right to wear. After his mother had carefully examined his silver-buttoned cap, surmounted by a silver bird, his robe of blue silk bordered with black, and his girdle with silver pendants, she whispered in his ear, "And now may I speak to the go-between?"

"Yes, now," replied her son.

LE MING'S MARRIAGE.

IT was about six weeks after Le Ming had achieved success in the examination-halls that he was sitting one sultry evening in his garden study composing couplets. Not a breath of wind stirred the lotus-leaves which covered the pond in front of his windows. The air was laden with the scent of a hundred flowers, which grew in profusion in pots and eccentrically-shaped borders on all sides of the pavilion. For the moment he had put aside his tobacco-pipe, and, yielding to the influences of a weary brain and the heat of the weather, was just dropping off into a state of dreamy drowsiness, when he was aroused by the sound of a footstep crossing the quaintly devised bridge which spanned the pond. Looking up, he saw his father's old body-servant approaching.

"Young sir," said the attendant, "the old master requests your presence in the reception-hall."

Uncertain as to what the business could be on which he was summoned, Le Ming followed the man to the hall, where he found his father and mother sitting in state, evidently prepared for the discussion

of some important family matter. Having made his obeisances, and having seated himself on a chair especially placed for him on his mother's right hand, his father thus addressed him :—

"Having now taken your degree, and having thus a prospect of soon gaining office and enjoying

"He was sitting . . . in his garden study composing couplets."

emolument, it is right and fitting that you should think of marrying. Remember, a man is accounted able to govern a district only when he has shown himself capable of ruling well a household; and how can you show that you can rule a household until you have one on which to try your hand? Besides,

who knows what fate may be in store for you? Were you to visit the 'Yellow Springs'[1] before I depart from this life, who would offer the yearly sacrifices at my tomb? or if you were to remain a barren pole,[2] who, in course of years, would there be to perform the same offices at your grave? On all accounts, then, it is your duty to marry, and your mother will therefore, without loss of time, communicate with a go-between."

"To hear is to obey, as it always has been with me," replied Ming; "but, at the same time, I should like to know something about the lady you may select as my wife before you exchange the wedding-presents. I have heard it said that in some western countries youths and maidens associate together and choose their wives and husbands for themselves, and that even within the eighteen provinces of China there exist barbarians who exercise a similar freedom of choice. Now I have no wish, as you may imagine, so to outrage the rules of propriety laid down by the Master[3] as to follow the example of such people; but I should like to know what my future wife is like—whether she is as beautiful as Kin-leen or as hideous as the old vegetable-seller at the corner of the street—whether she is good-tempered or a shrew—whether she is of a complacent disposition, or jealous and revengeful."

"Marriages, my son," said his mother, "are made in heaven, and you can no more break the heavenly cords which, unfelt but surely, bind your ankles to those of your future bride, than you can upset

[1] Hades. [2] A bachelor. [3] Confucius.

any other decree of the gods. The family with which I purpose to desire the go-between to communicate in the first instance is that of the ex-prefect Yang. I have already spoken to you about his daughter Tsai-yen, the 'Variegated Swallow,' who is, as I myself know—having seen her—extremely pretty, with a beautiful complexion and a willow-like waist. Besides, a good daughter makes a good wife; and remember last year, when her mother was so ill, what she did,—how she cut a slice out of her leg to mix with the broth which the doctor ordered for her mother's recovery! No—depend upon it, my son, if the Variegated Swallow enters your household she will make an excellent wife, and in educating your children will not fall far short of the wisdom of the Mother of Mencius."

"As I said just now," replied Ming, upon whom this description had a marked effect, "my only wish is to obey you, and I am therefore ready to be led by you whithersoever you desire."

"That is spoken like a true son of mine!" said Mrs Le, smiling on the youth. "I will now at once write to my old friend Mrs Siu, who has the best practice as a go-between in the district, and who knows more about the youths and maidens than a great many of their own parents do."

When Ming returned to his study after this interview he fell into a reverie, in which he pictured to himself the delights of being constantly in the society of a beauty such as one of those of whom he had occasionally caught glimpses through the blinds of their sedan-chairs; and if such a one

could only write verses, he felt that his cup would be full.

Meanwhile Mrs Le retired to her room, and taking pencil in hand, addressed the following note to the redoubtable match-maker Mrs Siu :—

"My unworthy son, though grown up, has not as yet achieved wedded harmony. I know, most respected lady, that you delight in pairing the youths and the maids of the harems, and in thus dissipating the coldness of their existences. If you could establish an alliance firm as a tripod, and ally our house with that of the ex-prefect Yang, your old companion would be grateful to you for ever. Begging you to help in this matter, I wish you boundless prosperity and continual joy."

Early the next morning, before Mrs Le had quite completed her usual housekeeping arrangements, a messenger announced that Mrs Siu was already on her way to pay her respects. Scarcely had the warning been given, when a sedan-chair bearing the expected guest stopped at the side-door leading to the ladies' apartments. Without a moment's delay, Mrs Siu was conducted to the presence of Mrs Le, who greeted her cordially. The match-maker was stout and comely, with laughing bright eyes; and though her nose was, judged by a European standard, rather too flat and her mouth too wide to be considered really pretty, yet, taken as a whole, she was a good-looking woman. Her manner, too, was cheery and confident, and she had a power of inspiring her clients with a profound belief in her skill and sincerity.

"For some time," she said, when the first greetings

were over, "I have been expecting to receive from you some such pearl-like epistle as that which reached me last night; and, curiously enough, I had scarcely put down your letter when a servant brought me in a note from Mrs Yang on the same subject. As I thought you would like to see what she says, I brought it with me. Between our two selves, Mrs Yang is not a very wise woman, and her note, as you will see, is no more to be compared with the flowings from *your* pencil than anything I could write would be to the latest composition of your talented son. But read it for yourself."

Nothing loath, Mrs Le took the note, and read as follows:—

"My daughter, though still young, is, let me tell you in confidence, anxious to have her feet tied with the red silk with which heaven connects the feet of brides and bridegrooms. Let me beseech you to act as a go-between for me, and I shall eagerly await the result. He! he!"

"Well," said Mrs Le, returning the note, "it is at all events fortunate that her daughter should be this way of thinking just now. But do tell me all you know of the Variegated Swallow; for though I have seen her, I have no very distinct recollection of her. But wait; I will send for my son, and you shall describe her to us both. Before he comes, however, let me ask you whether there is any reason, physical or otherwise, which might make the marriage objectionable."

"None whatever," replied Mrs Siu; and the two ladies had scarcely finished a conversation carried on

for a minute or two in an undertone when Le Ming entered. As the young man bowed his acknowledgment of the presence of the two ladies, Mrs Siu cast upon him a scrutinising glance, which ended in a look of that kind of contemptuous amusement with which women of experience regard pedantic young men. After a few words leading up to the subject in hand, she said, addressing Ming, "And now let me tell you, young sir, something about the Variegated Swallow. I have known her all her life, and so can speak confidently about her. Her filial piety is renowned throughout the prefecture; she attends upon her parents in complete fulfilment of the 'Book of Rites'; and though so learned a scholar as yourself might not consider her deeply versed in literature, she is yet well read, and has an art of striking off a copy of verses which is wonderful. Only last week I was remarking on the beauty of the view of the distant hills from their garden, and, quick as thought, she composed this couplet:—

'See, floating clouds enshroud the distant hills,
Adown whose sides pour countless dazzling rills.'

Then her appearance is perfect. Her eyebrows are arched like the rainbow; her complexion is as the mingled white and pink of the apple-blossom; her lips are red as roses; her feet are veritable golden lilies; and she sways as she walks like a willow branch swinging in the wind. In a word, she is perfection; and a marriage between so ripe a scholar as yourself and so accomplished a maiden would, in truth, be as the marriage of a pair of phœnixes."

It was impossible that Ming could be otherwise than moved by the description of such excellences, and the interview ended with a cordially expressed wish on his part that Mrs Siu might be successful in her negotiations. Thus far all was well, and the match-maker started in prosecution of her mission to the Variegated Swallow's parents in high spirits, which were by no means lessened when, on arriving, she found Mrs Yang was already a keen partisan of young Le Ming. The Variegated Swallow also, who joined in their deliberations, and who, seen by the light of nature, and not through Mrs Siu's rose-coloured spectacles, or through the medium of Mrs Le's doubtful recollection, appeared as a very ordinary-looking young woman, with a heavy expression of face and a somewhat stout unwieldy figure, assented with alacrity to endow the young graduate with her abundant person. The only other member of the family concerned—the ex-Prefect—after some inquiries as to the probability of young Ming obtaining employment in the mandarinate, and as to the provision which Mr Le was willing to make for the young couple, on both of which points Mrs Siu satisfied him by drawing on her sanguine imagination, solemnly gave his consent to the proposed alliance, and finally arranged with Mrs Siu that on receiving notice from her at any time during the next few days, he would be ready to receive the messenger who, according to custom, should be the bearer of a formal proposal from Mr Le.

With this favourable response Mrs Siu hurried back to Mrs Le, not altogether without some mis-

givings as to what Ming would think of his bride when he should lift her veil on the wedding-day. "If she had only cut a slice or two off her waist to mix with her mother's broth, instead of from her thigh, she would have come nearer my description of her," she said to herself, as she was carried through the streets in her sedan. But, after all, she consoled herself with the reflection that bridegrooms are not over particular, and that Ming did not appear likely to be very observant. Mrs Le was, she found, awaiting her return in full dress. Her hair was stiffened out with bandoline, and gay with bright-headed hairpins and gaudy flowers. Her face was thickly covered with cosmetics, and her lips were painted a ruddy red. She wore a handsomely embroidered dress, which only half concealed a many-coloured plaited petticoat, beneath which her crippled bandaged feet appeared, as she tottered rather than walked forward to receive her guest. Mrs Siu's complacent expression of face as she returned Mrs Le's greeting at once assured that lady that she was the bearer of good news. Eagerly Mrs Le listened to all that had passed at the interview, and nothing that had been said which was complimentary lost anything in Mrs Siu's recital. After communicating the news to Mr Le, it was determined that he should send a formal proposal on the following day at noon, and that Mrs Siu should take a message to the ex-Prefect to that effect.

So soon as Mrs Siu had taken her leave, a family council was held, to which Ming was summoned. The proceedings of the last two days had added considerably to his sense of self-importance, which had

already been sufficiently developed by his success as a scholar, and he entered the family hall with a swagger and a conceited air which fairly reflected the condition of his mind. He listened with an expression of approval to his father's account of the negotiations, and then replied: "My gratitude is boundless for the infinite trouble you are taking on behalf of your unworthy son, and I can assure you that it will be the endeavour of this little one to insist on my future wife paying every respect to you, my exalted parents. But let me remind you that, being now a Siu-ts'ai, more is expected of me in the matter of ceremonial than from one who has not conquered in the examination-halls"—Mr Le here rather winced as he thought of the three ineffectual attempts he had made years ago to win a bachelor's robe—"and I would therefore pray you that in every respect the marriage-rites as laid down in the Ritual of the Great Pure Dynasty may be followed on this occasion. I have just been looking over the chapters relating to the subject, and I find that the next step will be for you, honourable sir, to send a messenger with a letter of proposal to the lady's father."

"I am quite aware of the fact," said the old man testily; "and you may be sure that nothing will be done which could by any possibility be considered derogatory to your position as a Siu-ts'ai. I have already requested your cousin Chang Kin, 'the Golden,' to act as my ambassador, and, if you like, you may be present when I give him directions to-morrow at noon."

Of this permission Ming availed himself, partly out of a desire to see that the prescribed etiquette was really carried out, and partly out of a wish to display again his uniform as a graduate. On entering the hall at the appointed hour, he found that careful preparations had been made for the ceremony. The room had been swept and garnished, and the red hangings which adorned the divan and the chairs were new and brilliant. He had scarcely time to notice these particulars when his cousin was ushered in, dressed like himself in the full canonicals of a Siu-ts'ai, and with him he exchanged ceremonial greetings. Almost immediately afterwards, Mr Le entered, attired in robes of the finest silks, but lacking those insignia of scholarship or of office which are so dear to the hearts of Chinamen. Having bowed to the young men, he advanced by slow Confucian steps to the east side of the hall, while young Chang, who had evidently been drilled for the occasion, took up a position on the west side, facing him. They then both advanced, and Mr Le, with an obeisance, gave a letter to his nephew, at the same time describing to him its contents, and requesting him to hand it to the ex-prefect Yang, together with the presents which he confided to his care. With many bows, Chang the Golden retired from the hall, and entering his sedan, was borne swiftly to his destination.

Not so swiftly, however, but that a messenger had preceded him to announce his approach to the ex-Prefect's aide-de-camp, who was awaiting his arrival in the outer courtyard. The instant the messenger

came, word was sent in to the ex-Prefect, who reached the front door just as Chang the Golden's sedan arrived in front of it. "*Lai lo!*" (he has come!) shouted the porters, as they threw open the central doors; and at the same time the ex-Prefect stepped outside to receive the welcome guest. A small knot of spectators, who, attracted by the evident preparations which had been made, had collected to see who the expected stranger could be, were greatly edified at the low bows which were exchanged by the host and his guest, and by the glimpse they caught of the easy courtesy with which Mr Yang ushered young Chang through the outer courtyard, before the heavy doors were again swung back in their faces.

The house had been in the possession of the head of the Yang clan for many generations, and was of considerable pretensions. In the outer courtyard, on the east and west sides of which were servants' rooms, stood a number of ornamental shrubs in immense wooden tubs, while in the middle there splashed a fountain. A passage through a hall at the northern end of this courtyard led into another which was gay with flowers, and at the northern end of which was the hall to which Mr Yang conducted his guest, followed by the aide-de-camp and two or three servants in full official livery. On reaching the middle of the hall, Chang the Golden, who had entered on the left of his host, faced eastwards and handed to him Le's letter, at the same time briefly describing its contents, while the servants spread the ceremonial gifts on a table especially prepared for

the occasion. Mr Yang, having made an obeisance northwards towards the family altar, took the letter with a deep reverence from Chang, who bowed and made as though he would retire, saying, "I will trouble you no further, but beg to be allowed to depart."

The aide-de-camp, however, here stepped forward, and invited him to a room at the side of the court-yard, where he besought him to stay his footsteps for a few minutes. The young men were acquaintances of long standing, and the half-hour they now spent in each other's company passed quickly enough in conversation over the coming event, accompanied by sips of tea and whiffs of their tobacco-pipes.

Meanwhile Mr Yang, having first laid the letter upon a table before the family altar, again raised it, and opening the envelope, read as follows :—

"My unworthy son's name is Ming, and, bowing his head, he pays his respects to you.

"Respectfully I beg that your Excellency may deign to be kind, and not reject these cold and mean advances, but may listen to the proposal of the go-between, and be pleased to bestow your beloved daughter in marriage on the son of your servant. Let us, I beseech you, fulfil the ritual to the letter, and respectfully cast the horoscopes of your honourable daughter and my unworthy son, that by faithful attention to the wedding ceremonies we may weld together a compact which shall unite our families for a century to come. I send herewith a few paltry presents, in accordance with usage, and I pray your Excellency to cast the light of your countenance upon

them. I will say no more, but merely append the date of my son's birth, which was at the hour of the Rat (between 11 P.M. and 1 A.M.), on the 7th day of the 9th month of the 10th year of the reign of Heen-fung (1860)."

In a short invocation Mr Yang informed the spirits of his deceased ancestors of the contents of the letter, and of his intention to accept the proposal for his daughter's hand; and with a prayer for their blessing on the union, and a prostration before the altar, he returned to his study, where, taking pencil in hand, he wrote this reply:—

"Humbly I rejoice that you have listened to the words of the go-between, and have selected the daughter of your slave to be the bride of your honourable heir. I quite agree with you that we should proceed in accordance with the rites, and thus cement an alliance which shall last for all time. I am perfectly ashamed to offer in exchange for your lustrous presents the paltry turnip-like things which I now venture to send, and upon which I beg that you will deign to cast a glance. My daughter was born at the hour of the Dragon (between 7 A.M. and 9 A.M.), on the 21st day of the 3d month of the 4th year of the reign of Tung-che (1865)."

This epistle, which was written on delicately tinted sheets of paper on which were stamped sprays of plum-blossom, the emblems of marriage, having been enfolded in a handsome envelope to match, was carried by Mr Yang to the hall, whither the aide-de-camp had already reconducted Chang the Golden. Here the principals took up the same positions as

before, and, with a profound bow, the ex-Prefect handed the document to Chang, who received it with every expression of respect, and having given it into the charge of a servant, begged leave to retire. This he well knew Mr Yang would not allow, and was prepared with an acceptance when his host invited him to a repast in the outer hall. As a matter of course, though not until he had protested vehemently, Chang the Golden occupied the seat of honour on the left of his host. The sweetmeats and viands were all good, and the wine was excellent; so that, although Mr Yang was not a man after the Golden One's heart, that worthy succeeded in enjoying himself. Love for the Confucian classics was the only bond of union between the two men. The one was by nature cold and austere, and having spent many years in official life, his natural reserve had grown upon him until he had become as uncommunicative a man as it was possible to meet with. Chang, on the other hand, was of a rollicking nature, and found an even greater delight in a convivial supper than in a chapter of the 'Confucian Analects.' After a few vain attempts to break the ice, Chang determined to devote his attention to his plate and cup; and so gratifying were their contents to his taste that it was with some unwillingness that, when the wine had been passed round thrice, he rose to take his leave. With much formality Mr Yang conducted him to the door, and bade him adieu, with many bows, at the side of his sedan-chair.

Mr Le was delighted with the account brought back by Chang of the reception he had met with

from Mr Yang, and having read that gentleman's answer, he spread it on the family altar for the information of those unseen but ever present members of his household who, though dead, yet spake, and who were as real and living personages in the imagination of the worshipper as when they walked the halls of the family dwelling in corporeal form. An inward consciousness assured him that these guardians of his household approved of the proposed alliance, and he therefore at once sent for a Taoist priest to cast the horoscope of the youthful couple from their nativities. Mr Yang also followed exactly the same course, and, as it happened, sent for another priest of Tao from the same temple. By a private understanding these worthies, having extracted the largest possible amounts from their patrons by means of threatened difficulties, agreed to a favourable report on the destinies of the young people. They further earned an additional fee by choosing a lucky day for the interchange of a formal engagement. At one moment there was a danger that this might never be entered upon, for on the very day after the horoscopes had been cast, Mrs Le, in dusting her china ornaments, dropped from her hands one of her most cherished bowls, and broke it into a thousand pieces. Horror-stricken at the ill omen, she was at first inclined to forbid the banns; but in talking the matter over with her less superstitious husband, it was agreed between them that the marriage offered so many positive advantages that it would be a pity to break it off for an idea. So the incident was suppressed, and Mr Le set about

preparing the presents which were to be the seal of the engagement.

With great care he chose, with the help of his wife, six silken dresses befitting the Variegated Swallow's future rank as wife of a Siu-ts'ai, six ornaments consisting of bangles and earrings, and eight boxes of cakes. Having carefully packed these in red-lacquer boxes, each inscribed with a complex character meaning "double happiness," he despatched them, borne by servants dressed in red tunics, together with a pair of engagement-cards, adorned with a dragon and a phœnix, and a complimentary letter addressed to the ex-Prefect, all of which he again intrusted to the care of Chang the Golden. After another formal interview and silent meal, the ambassador was glad to hurry back, bearing a suitable reply, to the more congenial household of his principal, where a place was kept for him at the dinner which was spread to celebrate the engagement.

A few days later another procession left the Le mansion. This time Chang the Golden's sedan-chair was followed by another and a larger band of red-tunicked men bearing on bamboo poles red-lacquer boxes containing ladies' ornaments and knick-knacks, a couple of wild geese, a sheep, and jars of wine. On his arrival at Mr Yang's house he was met by that gentleman, as at other times, at the doorway, and was conducted to the hall, where, after a few complimentary remarks, Mr Yang begged that he would name a day for the marriage. In answer to this cue Chang produced from the folds of a red cloth a letter, which Mr Yang, having

first laid on the family altar, opened and read as follows :—

"Humbly and joyfully I congratulate myself that your Excellency has given your consent to the marriage of your beloved daughter to my unworthy son, who is now longing to go forth to meet her. Let me, therefore, beseech your Excellency to choose a fortunate day for their nuptials. Should you not already have determined upon one, I venture to suggest the 15th day of the 9th month of the present year. I beg to hand you herewith a few trifling presents, and trust that they may not be utterly beneath your notice."

Exactly the same formalities were observed in the delivery of this letter as on the former occasion, and after a similar delay in the aide-de-camp's room and a repetition of the same ceremonious repast, Chang the Golden returned to Mr Le bearing this reply :—

"Prostrate I received your felicitous commands. The emblematic geese are in my cold hall. But I long for a respite, for the thought of the separation from my daughter is more than I can bear. I pray you to overlook my shame, and to receive kindly my contemptible presents. As to the time you name for the marriage, I should not dare to oppose your decision, but listen reverently for your orders to assist as may be necessary. On my knees I beseech you to look down on this epistle."

As the eighth month was already far advanced, not much time was left to the parents of the young people for the completion of all the necessary arrangements; and while the Variegated Swallow, her sisters,

female cousins, and servants daily wept with loud lamentations at the prospect of her removal from her old home, Le Ming was entertaining his friends in a series of banquets. On the day immediately preceding the wedding, a procession of porters arrived at Mr Le's door, bearing on open trays the trousseau of the bride, together with a basket, a broom, curtains, cushions, a mattress, and other things for domestic use. These objects were both numerous and handsome; and as the procession had paraded the principal streets on its route, the people in the neighbourhood had ample opportunities of admiring the liberality of Mr Yang.

Just as the evening was closing in, a letter was brought to Ming by a travelling merchant, who said he had been strictly enjoined to give it into the hands of Ming by a gentleman whose name he had forgotten, at a town he had stopped at for the night two days before. He added that he should be starting on his return by the same road the next morning, and that if Ming would send an answer to his inn, it should be faithfully delivered. Ming recognised the handwriting as that of his former companion and competitor in the examination-halls, Wang, who, having failed to take his degree, had entered his uncle's bank in a neighbouring prefecture as accountant. Glad to find that his friend had not forgotten him, Ming opened the envelope and read as follows:—

"I rejoice that the male and female phœnixes sing in harmony, and that you are within reach of the feathery verdure of the matrimonial peach, and within sight of the river's banks. May every joy

attend you! Let not any coldness or backwardness on your part mar your joys, and may heaven and earth combine to give you progeny! And now I pray that the heavenly chanticleer[1] may delay his crowing, and that the river drum[2] may not break in upon your slumbers."

Ming, who was in high good-humour, was delighted at receiving the good wishes of his friend, and without loss of time he retired to his study and thus wrote in reply:—

"It is true that I have now harmoniously arranged a well-assorted marriage, and that the silken threads which entwined our feet have done their work. It now, therefore, only remains for me to hope that, as the ode says, 'the dawn may be darkened.' I was overcome with gratitude when I read your letter, the words of which are engraved on my heart. I thank you for the wish it contains that the heavenly chanticleer may forget to crow, and that the river drum may leave me undisturbed. Did these wishes originate from a recollection of a similar period in your own existence? Ha, ha!"

It was late before the last light was put out at Le's house, while at Yang's the friends of the bride wailed without ceasing throughout the night. As to the bride herself, she was sent off to bed early in preparation for the morrow. But at early dawn the servants and work-people in both houses were astir. Mr Le had portioned off two courtyards, which ad-

[1] This is an allusion to the belief that the cocks are set crowing each morning by a heavenly chanticleer, who crows at earliest dawn.

[2] The morning star.

joined the principal buildings of his mansion, for his son's use, and to these rooms the carpenters and upholsterers had given their final touches on the previous evening. On the wedding morning the servants took possession, and devoted their first care to the preparation of the wedding-feast. In the private apartment they set out two tables, one facing east and the other west, on which they placed fruit, vegetables, a jar of wine, four cups, and the wedding goblet. The legs of the two tables they bound together with threads of red silk, and on the threads they hung two silver bells to tinkle sweet harmony.

All these and other preparations occupied the greater part of the day, and as the evening advanced, Ming, who was already dressed in full canonicals, was summoned to the family hall, where he found his father awaiting him. Having graciously received the homage of his son, Mr Le handed him, while yet on his knees, "the parting cup," filled with the choicest wine of Suchow. This Ming drained to the dregs, and returned empty to the ever-present Chang the Golden, who stood by ready to take it. "And now, my son," said his father, "as you wish to go in person to receive your bride, go forth, and may every blessing attend you. As soon as you have crossed the threshold I shall betake myself to the family altar, there to inform the spirits of my ancestors of the events of this day." "I obey," replied Ming; and rising from his knees he went out, followed by Chang Kin carrying a pair of live wild geese under his arms,—for Ming was determined to have the real thing, and none of the artificial sym-

bols common on such occasions. Before the front door the wedding procession had already been duly marshalled. In front were twelve drummers and musicians; behind these stood two servants carrying lighted candles, for by this time it was dusk; next came Ming's and Chang's horses, followed by servants and bannermen; and last of all came the bride's sedan-chair, richly carved, adorned with many colours and bright with gay fringes. As Ming mounted his steed and the procession started, the musicians struck up a sonorous and appropriate air, which attracted a crowd of sightseers along the route.

Meanwhile the Variegated Swallow had been going through the formalities proper to the occasion. After having been attired in her wedding garments by the professional Instructress of matrimony, who had been engaged for the occasion, she also went to receive a parting cup at the hand of her father; but, less fortunate than Ming, she was doomed to listen on her knees to a long lecture on the duties of her new position, in which implicit obedience to the orders of her husband and dutiful attention to her father- and mother-in-law were duly insisted upon. This exhortation ended, her mother had scarcely time to say a few words of supplementary wisdom when a servant came to say that the bridegroom's procession was approaching. Instantly the ex-Prefect hurried to the front door, while the bride betook herself again to her bedroom, to add the last finishing touches to her dress. The meeting between Mr Yang and Ming, as the latter dismounted from his horse, was ceremonious and cordial, and the ex-Prefect lavished most unusual

compliments on his guest, who, with a wild-goose under each arm, had some difficulty in performing the necessary bows as he accompanied his host to the hall of audience. The scene at this moment was bustling and bright. The courtyard was full of the male friends of the Yang family, all dressed in their most brilliant robes, while those among them who were or had been holders of office wore on their caps the coloured buttons of their ranks, to which, in the cases of some who had distinguished themselves, were attached peacocks' feathers of one, two, or three "eyes," according as the wearers had earned a greater or less amount of the Emperor's approval. Inside the hall, under the glazed tiles and upturned corners of the roof, were visible the rich red hangings of the furniture, the delicate tracery and exquisite carving of the doorway, and numerous priceless curiosities arranged artistically about the room; while countless servants moved to and fro bearing the nuptial gifts brought by the guests, and attending to the wants of all.

Through this throng the ex-Prefect led Ming up the steps into the hall. All eyes were now turned to the two men as they walked with measured pace to the centre of the hall and stopped. The ex-Prefect, with a slight inclination of his head, then turned towards Ming, who still kept his face northwards; while Chang the Golden, taking the geese from Ming's arms, quickly tied their legs together with red silk, and placed them in position on the ground. Mr Yang's aide-de-camp now stepped forward, and with a bow presented a goblet of wine to Ming, who

poured from it a libation to the bound birds, accompanying the action with a *kotow* towards the family altar.

At this moment, from behind the screen which concealed the doorway at the northern end of the hall, entered the Variegated Swallow, whose features and even form were completely hidden under a red silken veil, which at the last moment the Instructress had thrown over her head. This veil made Ming as invisible to her as she was to him, and it was only, therefore, by the guidance of her two attendants, who supported her one on each side, that she was able to advance and bow in the direction of the spot where her future husband stood. While Ming was gazing with eager curiosity on the figure before him, the attendants cried in chorus, "Bridegroom, bow; your bride departs." Thus recalled to a sense of his duties, Ming returned the poor Variegated Swallow's reverence, and inviting her to accompany him, left the hall, followed by his bride. On reaching the doorway the bride's two attendants, who had been particularly selected for the office as being "women of luck," with husbands and children living, lifted the helpless Variegated Swallow into the chair and carefully shut the door. Again the chorus chanted, "Bridegroom, mount your horse and go before the chair;" and, again obedient to the cue, Ming did as he was bidden. At the same moment the procession started on its return journey, the musicians in front performing an air of triumph. Only one addition was made to the cavalcade, and that was the sedan-chair of the bride's youngest brother, which

followed immediately behind his sister's more gorgeous conveyance.

On arriving at the door of his house, Ming dismounted and stood ready to receive his bride, whose sedan was carried to the door between the lines of musicians and bannermen, who on halting had formed up on either side of the road. As the chair was deposited, Ming stepped forward rather nervously and tapped the door of the chair with his fan. The summons was answered by the Instructress, who opened the door and handed out the trembling Variegated Swallow, who was still enshrouded in her impenetrable veil. With the help of an attendant the Instructress lifted her bodily over a pan of lighted charcoal which stood on the threshold, while at the same time a servant went through the form of offering her some rice and preserved fruits. At one time Ming had intended to receive the homage of his bride on entering the house, as was the custom of the neighbourhood, but not finding any sanction for the practice in the 'Rituals,' he determined to dispense with it; and he therefore at once conducted his bride to the ancestral hall, where already the attendants had spread two prayer-mats on the floor. As Ming took up his position on the eastern mat, the Instructress led the Variegated Swallow to the western mat, and at a signal from the master of the ceremonies the pair fell on their knees before the ancestral altar, while Ming repeated the following invocation:—

"The relation of man and wife is that of the highest importance; and of all the rites marriage is the most estimable, since from it flow successive genera-

tions. Acting on my father's command, I have married Yang-Tsai-yen; and in obedience to the lots cast before the altars of our respective ancestors, we have on this day completed the ceremony. We now offer up this information to you, beseeching you, at the same time, to help, and bestow your gifts upon, this well-ordered house and harmonious family."

At a word from the master of the ceremonies the pair now rose to their feet, and again at another word of command prostrated themselves in humble adoration to heaven and earth. Again they rose, and once more knelt to call down the blessings of the household gods on their union. This concluded the religious part of the ceremony; and as the day had been a long one, and the formalities endless, even Ming, ritualist as he was, was glad to think that they had nearly performed their task. As for the poor Variegated Swallow, whose cramped feet made every movement wearisome, and whose long silken veil effectually excluded every breath of air, she was wellnigh ready to sink down from heat and fatigue. Gladly, therefore, they retired to their private apartment, where, though servants were constantly bustling in and out, guided by the orders of the Instructress, they were to be allowed a few minutes' respite. An additional interest also attached to the adjournment in Ming's eyes, as now for the first time he was to see the face of his bride.

The apartment was a large one. In the centre were placed the two tables which had already been prepared facing one another, while against the back wall stood the mat-covered bedstead which, denuded

as it was of all bed furniture with the exception of the curtains, looked less like a bedstead than a divan, the purpose of which it was now intended to serve, and for which it might have been mistaken had it not been for various mottoes hung about it, such as, "May a hundred sons and a thousand grandsons be your portion." Slowly—too slowly for Ming's impatience—the Instructress led the Variegated Swallow to the back of the tables, and slowly lifted the veil from her head, when she stood revealed before her husband. The moment was a trying one. Custom had forbidden her to paint or adorn her face in any way. No henna gave lustre to her eyes, or relieved the black rims which fatigue had imprinted around them. No rouge added colour to her pale cheeks, nor was there a trace of powder to conceal the somewhat yellow tinge which the heat of the day and the natural bilious hue of her complexion had together produced. Conscious of the disadvantages under which she appeared, and naturally nervous at having to face Ming's inspection, the poor Variegated Swallow looked shy and awkward, and was once or twice on the point of bursting into tears. Ming on his part was certainly disillusioned, but he was not much accustomed to the presence of young ladies. His two sisters were the only maidens of his own rank with whom he had ever been brought into contact, and nature had not endowed them bountifully. It was true that he had occasionally caught glimpses in the streets and temples of ladies very unlike his sisters in appearance, but they had always seemed to him as something visionary; whereas here was his bride standing before him in very substance,

and being a young man of a kindly disposition, he felt compassion for the nervous shyness of the poor trembling maiden. He spoke to her encouragingly and cordially, therefore, and seated her on the bedstead divan. The Instructress watched this process with superstitious eyes, and remarked with inward satisfaction that the Variegated Swallow had seated herself on the lappet of Ming's robe.

"Dull as she undoubtedly is," said the Instructress to herself, "it is plain that she has sense enough to rule in *this* house."

At this moment the servants announced that the feast was ready, and Ming sat down at the eastern table opposite his bride. In the courtyard, outside the open doors of the apartment, tables were spread for the guests, who had no sooner taken their places than there broke forth a continual clatter of chopsticks, wine-cups, and conversation, after the manner of wedding-feasts. The appearance and conduct of the bride were freely observed and criticised; and as etiquette forbade her to eat anything, she had to go through the trial of sitting motionless, and of enduring the gaze of her husband opposite and of the guests in the courtyard. So soon as Ming's appetite was appeased, the Instructress presented him with the wedding goblet in which to pledge his bride, who in her turn received the same goblet, replenished, from the hands of Chang the Golden, and timidly returned the pledge of her husband. With this ceremony the feast came to an end, and the newly married pair rose from the table. The Variegated Swallow betook herself to the divan, and Ming, after exchanging a few words with

her, went out to join the revellers in the courtyard. As he passed out of the door it was shut behind him by the Instructress, who remained in full possession to make such alterations as were necessary to fit the room for its original purpose.

The presence of Ming added zest to the revel in the courtyard, which was by this time becoming rather tame. To have the bridegroom in person at whom to launch their jokes and sallies was the vinegar to the salad of their wit, while his somewhat clumsy attempts to answer their attacks served only to stimulate their mirth. Altogether this part of the entertainment was not, in Ming's opinion, a success, and he was by no means sorry to bid adieu to the last guest. Tired though he was, however, his countenance brightened and his spirits rose as he turned towards his bride's apartment. As he entered the room the Instructress was in the act of bidding good-night to the Variegated Swallow, who seemed unwilling to part from her only remaining link with her old home.

"You won't be far off?" she whispered.

"No," replied the Instructress; "I shall sleep on your door-mat, so as to be at hand if you want me."

The faithful and weary woman was true to her word, and in five minutes the rays of the full moon shone through the lattice of the window on her sleeping form coiled up at the door of the bridal chamber.

A BUDDHIST STORY.

[The following story is of Buddhist origin, and has reference to the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. According to this tenet of the faith every soul passes through a variety of existences, the conditions of the successive states of which depend on the amount of merit or demerit acquired in the previous life. Those who have done good pass into higher spheres of enjoyment and prosperity, while those who have done evil descend in the scale of creation by leaps and by bounds. Thus, a man who has kept most of the commandments of Buddha, but failed in others, may expect to be born a horse or one of the more respectable animals in his next state of existence; while one who has persistently broken the whole law, may think himself fortunate if he reappears as a fish or a dog. This doctrine, which represents all animated creation as being one and interchangeable, makes the killing of animals acts of murder and of possible impiety. For how can one be sure that in killing an ox or a horse one is not murdering a friend who, when a man, may have failed in some of his religious duties? or in crushing a beetle, that one is not cutting short the career of a near but perhaps dissolute relative? Eating animal flesh, of course, only adds to the crime of murder, and in the following pages we see how very easily Mr Le may have eaten his old friend Sin.]

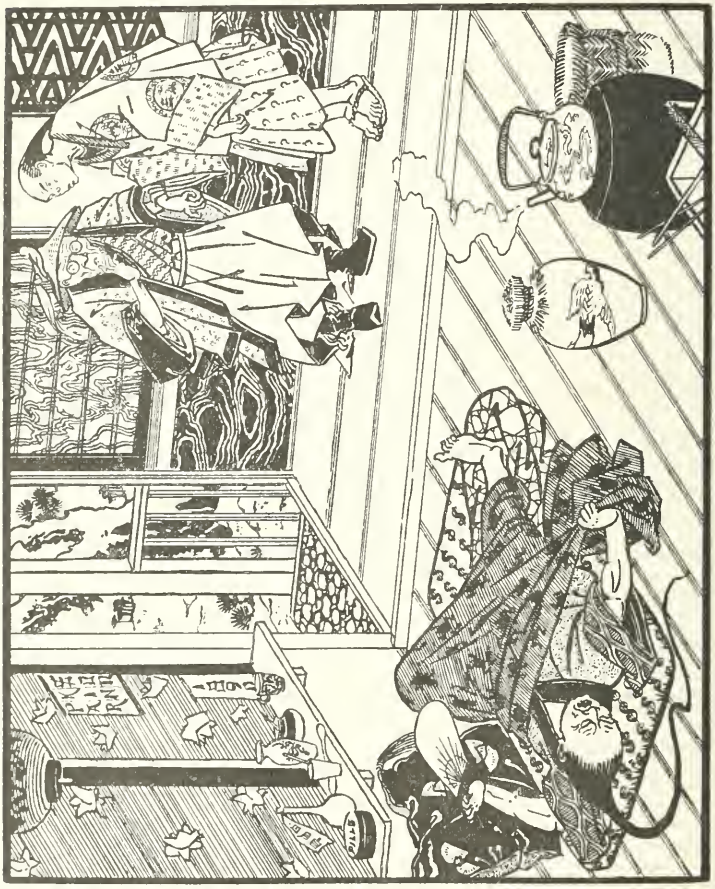
SOME years ago there lived in the village of "Everlasting Felicity," in the province of "The Four Streams," two officials, who from different causes had been relieved from the necessity of serving their country and their emperor. Mr Le, the elder of the two, was a somewhat heavy and morose man—one in whom it was difficult to say whether his appetite for his creature-comforts or his indifference to the feelings and opinions of his fellow-men predominated. In the last post which he had had the honour to fill he had been charged, his friends said unjustly, with having inflicted on innocent persons illegal torture, some refinements of which had emanated from his not otherwise inventive brain, and of having levied blackmail with so greedy a hand that the people had been driven to the verge of rebellion. When the storm was about to break Le wisely retired to the village of "Everlasting Felicity," carrying with him quite a little fortune which he had neither inherited nor had saved out of his official income.

Mr Sin, the younger of the two, was of an impulsive and a rather erratic nature. As an official his chief fault was the restlessness of his administration. He worried the people in his district; and when the infliction of constant worry is combined with an itching palm, even the sluggish Chinese nature will after a time turn on the worrier. And so it came about that he was recommended by his superiors to resign; and he also, having gathered together his ill-gotten goods, found his way to the same haven of rest to which Mr Le had turned his footsteps.

The similarity of their fates induced these two worthies to set up house together. Both being rich, they surrounded themselves with every comfort, and spent their leisure in entertaining those of their neighbours who could entertain them in return, and in discussing the ineffable wisdom of the moral maxims of Confucius. While pursuing the even tenor of this most inestimable way, it chanced that Mr Sin, having exposed his clean-shaven head unduly to the sun, fell sick of a fever. Mr Le, though annoyed at the circumstance—for he was expecting some rich friends to dinner that day—sent for a doctor and gave generally directions that Sin was to be looked after. In answer to the call the doctor arrived. He was an old man and lean, perhaps from much study, and he wore a pair of large horn-rimmed spectacles. His first glance at his patient showed him that the hot principle in Sin's nature was riding rough-shod over the cold principle, and had completely upset the equilibrium which should be maintained in all well-regulated constitutions. The symptoms of high fever were so plain that he thought it unnecessary even to feel the patient's pulse, but at once prescribed a decoction of powdered deer horns and dragon's blood, with pills made from hare's liver, to be taken at intervals. Before leaving the house he took Ting, Sin's valet, aside, and told him that on no account was he to leave his master alone. "At any moment," said he, "he may become delirious, and then Buddha alone can say what he may do."

Ting promised, with many asseverations, that

nothing should induce him to leave his master's presence for an instant. But even Chinamen occasionally fail to act up to their professions, and when, after some restlessness, Sin fell off into a pro-



"On no account to leave his master."

found sleep, Ting, hearing sounds of merriment in the servants' quarters, persuaded himself that it would be quite safe to leave his master for a bit, and went

noiselessly out to enjoy himself among his fellows. He had scarcely left the room, however, when Sin became restless again. He turned and twisted in bed and rolled his weary and aching head from side to side.

"Hot, hot, hot!" he moaned; "my head burns, the pillow scorches! I can't breathe! The room is suffocating me! Oh for a breath of the fresh air of heaven in the fields and woods! Why should I not go and enjoy it? I will!" he exclaimed, and in an instant he sprang out of bed, rushed out of the room, threw open the front door, and ran down the road into the neighbouring meadows.

"Ah," he shouted as he threw himself on a bank, "this is delicious! Now I can live and breathe. The air of heaven cools my throbbing head, and I am myself again."

But presently the air again became oppressive. Shooting pains pierced his brain. His skin burned and his tongue became parched. "Oh," he cried, "the fire-demon has followed me here! What can I do to cool my tortured head? If I might only plunge into a river of cold water I should be well." So saying, he rose from the bank and wandered on through woods and fields until, to his infinite delight, he saw before him a broad, cool, shining river.

"Now is my chance," he exclaimed, and without a moment's hesitation he plunged into the rolling tide. Being an expert swimmer he dived to the bottom, then skimmed along the top, his queue looking like an eel floating behind him on the surface, and presently stretched himself out flat on the

water. "Ah," he said, "this is happiness. Who would live on land who can live in water?" As he ceased speaking, he heard close to him a kind of gurgling chuckle, something between the noise made by a person choking, and by water poured out of a

"Rushed out of the room . . . and ran down the road."

bottle, and turning round he saw a large tench which was staring at him with round eyes, and with a contorted expression of mouth which Sin rightly interpreted to be the effect of laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"You!" replied the fish.

"And what do you see in me to laugh at?" he inquired, somewhat angrily.

"I heard what you said," answered the fish, "and the idea of a man knowing what the delight of living in water is, was so ludicrous that it sent me into a fit of laughter which has made me feel very

"Oh," he cried, "the fire demon has followed me here!"—Page 235.

uncomfortable, for I am not much accustomed to laugh."

"So I should imagine from the hideous noise you made," said Sin. "But tell me, how can you enjoy the water more than I do?"

"Why, you are a stranger and a foreigner to the element. For a few minutes you may enjoy swim-

ming and diving, but your limbs would soon tire, those ugly limbs which make you look like a frog, though frogs have the advantage over you of moving horizontally, while you by some perversion in your nature are born to walk upright, for all the world like trees moving. And then, when you are hungry, you have to seek your food on land, while we, as we glide swiftly through the rushing waters without fatigue, and almost without movement, find the means of our nourishment in the midst of our enjoyment."

"If this is really so," said Sin, "I would give something to be like you."

"Do you mean that you would like to become a fish?"

"Yes; I would give up all the money I squeezed out of the people when I was a magistrate to enjoy the river as you enjoy it."

"Come with me, then," said the fish; and turning round, he swam up-stream at such a pace that Sin was obliged to call to him to stop.

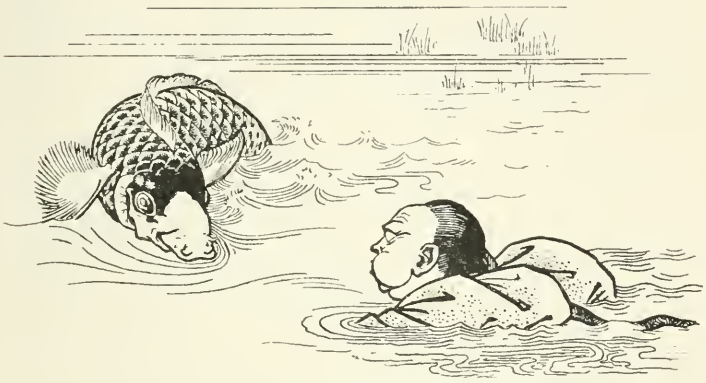
"Ah!" he said, in a tone of pitying contempt, "I forgot you were a man."

After going for a few minutes at a reduced speed, the fish led the way into a small bay in the bank, where, surrounded by attendant fishes, lay a huge carp whose size and gravity of deportment marked him out as a ruler of his kind.

As Sin's guide approached the monarch he indicated reverence and submission by wriggling towards him in the mud.

"May it please your Majesty," he began, "I have

found a poor man who wants very much to become a fish. Knowing your infinite benevolence I have ventured to bring him into your august presence." So saying, he motioned Sin to approach, who, being anxious to propitiate the king, began wriggling in the mud in imitation of his guide. But in so doing he made such a commotion in the water and stirred up so much dirt that the fishes all began to choke, and his own eyes were so completely blinded that he could not see where he was going.



"Ah!" said the carp, "I forgot you were a man."

"Stop!" shrieked the king. "What are you doing?" Sin was glad enough to obey, and when the water had cleared a little he lay prone before the carp awaiting instructions.

"Are you really desirous of becoming a fish?" inquired the king, in a husky voice, for his throat had not quite recovered from the effects of Sin's wriggling.

"I am, your Majesty," replied Sin. "This gentle-

man here has shown me that fishes alone can really appreciate life in streams, and as the slight taste of that existence which I am able to enjoy is so delightful, I am persuaded that the full enjoyment of it must be ravishing."

"You shall have your desire then," said the king, and turning to an attendant trout he told him to go and fetch a large fish's skin.

Presently the messenger returned with a carp's skin of a size which proved to be just the right length. At a word from the king the courtiers put Sin into it, and having tucked him in with the exception of his hands and feet, fastened him up. For a moment or two Sin felt very uncomfortable, but by degrees he became conscious of a physical change in his constitution. His limbs began to tingle and to lose their identities. His arms gradually contracted, while his hands flattened out and assumed the shape of fins. His legs became welded together, and his feet by degrees took the form of a tail. When this strange transformation was completed, Sin was desirous of trying his new powers, and so, with a bow and an expression of thanks to his Majesty, he turned to swim off.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said the king; "I have a word of advice to give you. Know, then, that men are always trying to catch us fishes, and that there are two methods which they especially employ —hook and net. Now, if ever you see a worm dangling in the water in the shape of a hook, don't touch it, for if you do you will be a dead fish; and if ever you chance to see a net before you, turn round

and swim as fast as you can in the opposite direction, lest you should be caught in its meshes."

"I thank your Majesty for your instructions," answered Sin, "and your words shall be engraven on my"—he was going to say heart, but he was not sure whether fishes had hearts, and so he said "memory." So saying, and with a reverent wriggle in the mud, he turned down-stream. At first he experienced some little difficulty, being unaware of the steadying force of his tail and fins. He wagged his tail as a man would kick out his legs, and the result was that instead of turning slightly, as was his intention, to avoid a stick, he made a complete circuit. And he more than once threw himself on his back by the too violent use of a fin. But by degrees he became master of the situation, and swam fairly along, the cool water gently lashing his sides as he glided swiftly with the current. Never in his life on earth had he felt so fresh and invigorated. The sensation of activity and power in an element which constantly refreshed without stint and without fail was exquisitely delightful. Every variety of movement added fresh enjoyment to the enraptured Sin, who was fairly entranced with the pleasures of his new existence. After a time, however, he began to feel the discomforts of hunger, and remembering that he had now to seek his own food, he devoted his energies to finding a worm. But whether through want of skill in the kind of search, or from scarcity of worms, certain it is that he was eminently unsuccessful. He prowled along the muddy banks, he dived down to the bottom, and he peered among the rubbish collected

round the wrecks of punts and stumps of trees which strewed the bed of the river. But all in vain; and what made his failure the more distressing was that his appetite was becoming voracious.

In one of his predatory expeditions he saw a worm, and at first his joy was intense; but he was fain to recognise that it hung in the water in the shape of a hook, and remembering the king's words of warning, he passed by on the other side. After many fruitless swimmings to and fro, however, and when his strength began to fail and his energies to slacken for want of food, it chanced that he again found himself face to face with the dangling worm which he had before avoided. "Eat it," whispered the demon of hunger in his ear; "never mind what the old carp said. He is a fish of a past generation, and has not the knowledge and intelligence that we have. As to its shape, who ever saw a worm straight? and see, its tail is quite wagging with enjoyment." "Or pain," suggested prudence. "Not a bit of it," answered the demon. "But if you are afraid of gulping it down altogether, bite a bit off and then you can put it to the proof." Weakened by hunger, Sin yielded to the temptation and nibbled off a piece. The taste of food and the innocuousness of the first mouthful broke down the little hesitation he had left, and with greedy maws he swallowed the whole worm.

Never was delight turned more instantly into pain. The hook, which had been concealed in the worm, pierced the roof of his mouth with an agonising prick. In his pain and terror he tried to swim away, but every movement, every writhe, added to his misery,

and to complete his horror, he found that he was being pulled up towards the surface. When he became conscious of this he struggled violently, regardless of the torture it entailed, but all in vain. In spite of his efforts he was drawn out of the

"In spite of his efforts he was drawn out of the water."

water, when, looking upwards, he saw, to his surprise and relief, that his captor was his own boatman, Chang.

"Let me go this instant, Chang," he said. "I am not a fish, but your master Sin. Take this horrid

hook out of my mouth and put me back in the water at once."

"Well," thought Chang, "I never heard a fish make a noise like that before. But he is a wonderfully fine one, and I will just take him home to Mr Le." So thinking, he seized the fish, tore the hook out of its jaws and threw it down in the boat.

"Ah, you scoundrel!" shouted Sin. "How dare you treat your master in this way? You have broken my jaw, and injured my side. I dismiss you from my service. Put me back into the water."

"I have heard old women tell tales of birds that talked," said Chang, aloud, "but I will be bambooed if I don't think I have got hold of a fish that talks. But I daresay he will eat just as well as one that does not."

"What are you talking about, you fool?" said Sin. "I am not a fish, but your master. Once again I order you to let me go." These brave words ill consorted with the terror suggested by Chang's word "eat." The idea of being served up as a meal was almost more than he could endure.

At this moment the boat touched the shore, and without more ado Chang lifted the fish by its gills, and stepped on to the bank.

"Oh! oh! oh! you will kill me!" shouted Sin. "How dare you behave to me in this way? I will have you flayed alive for this. Oh, for an hour of manhood!"

By this time Chang had learned to disregard the strange noises made by the fish, and he trudged home

with it, full only of the thought of the "cumshaw"[1] which Mr Le would probably give him for bringing home so fine a carp. Sin, also, who was beginning to feel weak from pain and the absence of water, determined to reserve his energies until he should come to his house, when he felt sure that the old porter would certainly know him.

On arriving at the gate, they were met by the porter, who, on seeing Chang and his prize, exclaimed, "Hai-yah! Chang, you are in luck to-day. What a splendid fish you have got! Mr Le has just sent out to know whether you have brought in anything."

"Porter," said Sin, "I am not a fish, but your master Sin, and this insolent fellow Chang has tortured me inexpressibly, and refuses to put me back in the river. I depend on you to take me back at once."

"Now, by Confucius! Chang," said the doorkeeper, "you have got hold of a queer fish. I never heard a carp growl and snuffle like that before. You had better take it in at once to Mr Le."

Alas! thought Sin, it is useless trying to make these fools understand me. I must wait until I can explain myself to Le. His opportunity soon came, for Chang carried off his prize straight to Mr Le's apartment.

"Well, Chang, what have you got there?" asked Le.

"May it please your Excellency, I have brought one of the finest carp I ever saw."

[1] *I.e.*, present.

"Le," said Sin in the loudest voice he could now command, "listen to me a moment. I am your

"Hai-yah! Chang, you are in luck to-day."

friend Sin, and I put on this fish's skin merely to try what it is to be a fish. Alas! I know now only

too well what that is. This villain Chang has tortured me beyond endurance. Tell him, as he will no longer obey me, to take me back to the river, as I should be glad now to resume my former shape. I have had enough of fins and scales." And hooks and worms, he might have added.

"Why, Chang, you have got hold of an extraordinary beast. He grunts like a pig. However, I daresay he will make a good dish." ("Oh!" groaned Sin.) "Take him to the cook."

"What! eat your old friend Sin? Impossible, Le!"

"And tell him to split him open and grill him with some of that hot sauce I had yesterday."

"Le! Le! Le! has it come to this—that you will eat your old friend?" screamed Sin. "Alas that my end should be to be split open and grilled! My only chance now is that the cook may know me."

But even this last hope was destined to be disappointed. As Chang handed the fish to the cook, Sin said, as loudly and as distinctly as he could—"Cook, I am not a real fish, I am Mr Sin. I have always been kind to you, cook, and I now beg you to take me back to the river."

"Your carp makes strange noises, Chang," said the cook, "but I will soon stop his grunting. Give me the chopper."

"Oh! spare me! spare me my life!" screamed Sin. But, regardless of his cries, the cook complacently placed him on the kitchen block, and lifting the chopper, gave him a violent blow on the head.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sin, sitting up in bed and thor-

oughly aroused, "what a knock I have given my head against the bedpost!" At first he could scarcely realise that he was safe in his own bed, his sensations had been so vivid. But at length he fell back with a sigh of relief, for, behold! it was a dream.

A FICKLE WIDOW.

ADAPTED FROM THE CHINESE.

[At the time when Plato and Aristotle were elaborating their systems of ethical and political philosophy, the Taoist philosophers of China were devoting their lives to the study of mysticism, and to vain attempts to master the powers of Nature by the use of the philosopher's stone. One of the most noted of these searchers after immortality was a certain Chwang Chow (*circâ* B.C. 330), who is popularly believed to have been endowed with rare supernatural gifts. Many weird stories are told of his extraordinary powers, not the least strange of which is the following, which is adapted from the tale as told in the 'K'in koo k'e Kwan,' or 'Strange Stories of Ancient and Modern Times.' The story has been translated into several languages, and in some of its details bears a resemblance to Voltaire's 'Zadig.' It may possibly also have inspired the author of "The Knight and the Lady," in the 'Ingoldsby Legends.']

AT a distance from the capital, and in the peaceful retirement of the country, there dwelt many centuries ago a philosopher named Chwang, who led a pleasurable existence in the society of his third wife, and in the study of the doctrines of his great master, Lao-tsze. Like many philosophers, Chwang had not been fortunate in his

early married life. His first wife died young; his second he found it necessary to divorce, on account of misconduct; but in the companionship of the Lady T'ien he enjoyed a degree of happiness which had previously been denied him. Being a philosopher, however, he found it essential to his peace that he should occasionally exchange his domestic surroundings for the hillsides and mountain solitudes. On one such expedition he came unexpectedly on a newly made grave, at the side of which was seated a young woman dressed in mourning, who was gently fanning the new mound. So strange a circumstance was evidently one into which a philosopher should inquire. He therefore approached the lady, and in gentle accents said, "May I ask what you are doing?"

"Well," replied the lady, "the fact is that this grave contains my husband. And, stupid man, just before he died he made me promise that I would not marry again until the soil above his grave should be dry. I watched it for some days, but it got dry so very slowly that I am fanning it to hasten the process." So saying, she looked up into Chwang's face with so frank and engaging a glance that the philosopher at once decided to enlist himself in her service.

"Your wrists are not strong enough for such work," he said, "let me relieve you at it."

"By all means," replied the lady briskly. "Here is the fan, and I shall owe you an everlasting debt of gratitude if you will fan it dry as quickly as possible."

Without more ado Chwang set to work, and by the

exercise of his magical powers he extracted every drop of moisture from the grave with a few waves of the fan. The lady was delighted with his success, and with the sunniest smile said, "How can I thank you sufficiently for your kindness! As a small mark of my gratitude, let me present you with this embroidered fan which I had in reserve; and as a token of my esteem I really must ask you to accept one of my silver hair-pins." With these words she presented the philosopher with the fan, and drawing out one of her ornamented hair-pins, she offered it for his acceptance. The philosopher took the fan, but, possibly having the fear of Lady T'ien before his eyes, he declined the pin. The incident made him thoughtful; and as he seated himself again in his thatched hall, he sighed deeply.

"Here is the fan. . . . fan it dry as quickly as possible."

"Why are you sighing," inquired the Lady T'ien, who happened to enter at that moment, "and where

does the fan come from which you hold in your hand?"

Thus invited, Chwang related all that had passed at the tomb. As he proceeded with the tale, Lady Tien's countenance fell, and when he had concluded she broke forth indignantly, inveighing against the young widow, whom she vowed was a disgrace to her sex. So soon as she had exhausted her vituperations, Chwang quietly repeated the proverb, "Knowing men's faces is not like knowing their hearts."

Interpreting this use of the saying as implying some doubts as to the value of her protestations, Lady Tien exclaimed:—

"How dare you condemn all women as though they were all formed in the same mould with this shameless widow? I wonder you are not afraid of calling down a judgment on yourself for such an injustice to me, and others like me."

"What need is there of all this violence?" rejoined her husband. "Now, tell me, if I were to die, would you, possessed as you are of youth and beauty, be content to remain a widow for five, or even three years?"

"A faithful minister does not serve two princes, and a virtuous woman never thinks of a second husband," sententiously replied the lady. "If fate were to decree that you should die, it would not be a question of three years or of five years, for never, so long as life lasted, would I dream of a second marriage."

"It is hard to say, it is hard to say," replied Chwang.

"Do you think," rejoined his wife, "that women

are like men, destitute of virtue and devoid of justice? When one wife is dead you look out for another, you divorce this one and take that one; but we women are for one saddle to one horse. Why do you say these kind of things to annoy me?"

With these words she seized the fan and tore it to shreds.

"Calm yourself," said her husband; "I only hope, if occasion offers, you will act up to your protestations."

Not many days after this Chwang fell dangerously ill, and as the symptoms increased in severity, he thus addressed his wife—

"I feel that my end is approaching, and that it is time I should bid you farewell. How unfortunate that you destroyed that fan the other day! you would have found it useful for drying my tomb."

"Pray, my husband, do not at such a moment suggest such suspicions of me. Have I not studied the 'Book of Rites,' and have I not learnt from it to follow one husband, and one only? If you doubt my sincerity, I will die in your presence to prove to you that what I say, I say in all faithfulness."

"I desire no more," replied Chwang; and then, as weakness overcame him, he added faintly, "I die. My eyes grow dim."

With these words he sank back motionless and breathless.

Having assured herself that her husband was dead, the Lady Tien broke out into loud lamentations, and embraced the corpse again and again. For days and

nights she wept and fasted, and constantly dwelt in her thoughts on the virtues and wisdom of the deceased. As was customary, on the death of so learned a man as Chwang, the neighbours all came to offer their condolences and to volunteer their assistance. Just as the last of these had retired, there arrived at the door a young and elegant scholar, whose face was like a picture, and whose lips looked as though they had been smeared with vermilion. He was dressed in a violet silk robe, and wore a black cap, an embroidered girdle, and scarlet shoes. His servant announced that he was a Prince of the Kingdom of Tsoo, and he himself added by way of explanation—

"There arrived a young and elegant scholar."

"Some years ago I communicated to Chwang my desire to become his disciple. In furtherance of this purpose I came hither, and now, to my inexpressible regret, I find on my arrival that my master is dead."

To evince his respectful sorrow, the Prince at once exchanged his coloured clothing for mourning gar-

ments, and prostrating himself before the coffin, struck his forehead four times on the ground, and sobbed forth—

"Oh, learned Chwang, I am indeed unfortunate in not having been permitted to receive your instructions face to face. But to show my regard and affection for your memory, I will here remain and mourn for you a hundred days."

With these words he prostrated himself again four times, while he watered the earth with his tears.

When more composed, he begged to be allowed to pay his respects to Lady T'ien, who, however, thrice declined to see him, and only at last consented when it was pointed out to her that, according to the most recondite authorities, the wives of deceased instructors should not refuse to see their husband's disciples.

After then receiving the Prince's compliments with downcast eyes, the Lady T'ien ventured just to cast one glance at her guest, and was so struck by his beauty and the grace of his figure, that a sentiment of more than interest suffused her heart. She begged him to take up his abode in her house, and when dinner was prepared, she blended her sighs with his. As a token of her esteem, so soon as the repast was ended, she brought him the copies of "The Classic of Nan-hwa," and the "Sûtra of Reason and of Virtue," which her husband had been in the habit of using, and presented them to the Prince. He, on his part, in fulfilment of his desire of mourning for his master, daily knelt and lamented by the side of the coffin, and thither also the Lady T'ien repaired to breathe her sighs. These constant meetings provoked short

conversations, and the glances, which on these occasions were exchanged between them, gradually betook less of condolence and more of affection, as time went on. It was plain that already the Prince was half enamoured, while the lady was deeply in love. Being desirous of learning some particulars about her engaging guest, she one evening summoned his servant to her apartment, and having plied him with wine, inquired from him whether his master was married.

"My master," replied the servant, "has never yet been married."

"What qualities does he look for in the fortunate woman he will choose for his wife?" inquired the lady.

"My master says," replied the servant, who had taken quite as much wine as was good for him, "that if he could obtain a renowned beauty like yourself, madam, his heart's desire would be fulfilled."

"Did he really say so? Are you sure you are telling me the truth?" eagerly asked the lady.

"Is it likely that an old man like myself would tell you a lie?" replied the servant.

"If it be so, will you then act as a go-between, and arrange a match between us?"

"My master has already spoken to me of the matter, and would desire the alliance above all things, if it were not for the respect due from a disciple to a deceased master, and for the animadversions to which such a marriage would give rise."

"But as a matter of fact," said the Lady T'ien, "the Prince was never my husband's disciple; and as to our neighbours about here, they are too few and

insignificant to make their animadversions worth a thought."

The objections having been thus overcome, the servant undertook to negotiate with his master, and promised to bring word of the result at any hour of the day or night at which he might have anything to communicate.

So soon as the man was gone, the Lady Tien gave way to excited impatience. She went backwards and forwards to the chamber of death, that she might pass the door of the Prince's room, and even listened at his window, hoping to hear him discussing with his servant the proposed alliance.

"She went backwards and forwards to the chamber of death."

All, however, was still until she approached the coffin, when she heard an unmistakable sound of hard breathing. Shocked and terrified, she exclaimed, "Can it be possible that the dead has come to life again!"

A light, however, relieved her apprehensions by discovering the form of the Prince's servant lying in a drunken sleep on a couch by the corpse. At any

other time such disrespect to the deceased would have drawn from her a torrent of angry rebukes, but on this occasion she thought it best to say nothing, and on the next morning she accosted the defaulter without any reference to his escapade of the night before. To her eager inquiries the servant answered that his master was satisfied on the points she had combated on the preceding evening, but that there were still three unpropitious circumstances which made him hesitate.

"What are they?" asked the lady.

"First," answered the man, "my master says that the presence of the coffin in the saloon makes it difficult to conduct marriage festivities in accordance with usage; secondly, that the illustrious Chwang having so deeply loved his wife, and that affection having been so tenderly returned by her in recognition of his great qualities, he fears that a second husband would probably not be held entitled to a like share of affection; and thirdly, that not having brought his luggage, he has neither the money nor the clothes necessary to play the part of a bridegroom."

"These circumstances need form no obstacle to our marriage," replied the lady. "As to the first objection, I can easily have the coffin removed into a shed at the back of the house; then as to the second, though my husband was a great Taoist authority, he was not by any means a very moral man. After his first wife's death he married a second, whom he divorced, and just before his own decease, he flirted outrageously with a widow whom he found fanning her husband's grave on the hill yonder. Why, then, should

your master, young, handsome, and a prince, doubt the quality of my affection? Then as to the third objection, your master need not trouble himself about the expenses connected with our marriage, I will provide them. At this moment I have twenty taels of silver in my room, and these I will readily give him to provide himself clothes withal. Go back, then, and tell the Prince what I say, and remind him that there is no time like the present, and that there could be no more felicitous evening for our marriage than that of to-day."

Carrying the twenty taels of silver in his hand, the servant returned to his master, and presently brought back word to the lady that the Prince was convinced by her arguments, and ready for the ceremony.

On receipt of this joyful news, Lady T'ien exchanged her mourning for wedding garments, painted her cheeks, reddened her lips, and ordered some villagers to carry Chwang's coffin into a hut at the back of the house, and to prepare for the wedding. She herself arranged the lights and candles in the hall, and when the time arrived stood ready to receive the Prince, who presently entered, wearing the insignia of his official rank, and dressed in a gaily embroidered tunic. Bright as a polished gem and a gold setting, the two stood beneath the nuptial torch, radiant with beauty and love. At the conclusion of the ceremony, with every demonstration of affection, the Prince led his bride by the hand into the nuptial chamber. Suddenly, as they were about to retire to rest, the Prince was seized with violent convulsions. His face became distorted, his eyebrows stood on end,

and he fell to the ground, beating his breast with his hands.

The Lady T'ien, frantic with grief, embraced him, rubbed his chest, and when these remedies failed to revive him, called in his old servant.

"Has your master ever had any fits like this before?" she hurriedly inquired.

"Often," replied the man, "and no medicine ever

"The coffin removed."

alleviates his sufferings; in fact, there is only one thing that does."

"Oh, what is that?" asked the lady.

"The brains of a man, boiled in wine," answered the servant. "In Tsoo, when he has these attacks, the king, his father, beheads a malefactor, and takes his brains to form the decoction; but how is it possible here to obtain such a remedy?"

"Will the brains of a man who has died a natural death do?" asked the lady.

"Yes, if forty-nine days have not elapsed since the death."

"My former husband's would do then. He has only been dead twenty days. Nothing will be easier than to open the coffin and take them out."

"But would you be willing to do it?"

"I and the Prince are now husband and wife. A wife with her body serves her husband, and should I refuse to do this for him out of regard for a corpse, which is fast becoming dust?"

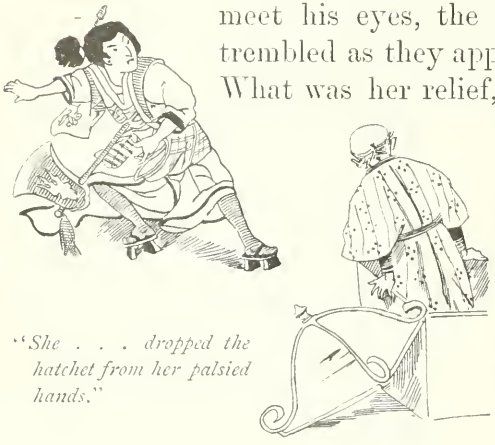
"*The Prince was seized with violent convulsions.*"—Page 259.

So saying, she told the servant to look after his master, and seizing a hatchet, went straight to the hut to which the corpse had been removed. Having arranged the light conveniently, she tucked up her sleeves, clenched her teeth, and with both hands brought down the hatchet on the coffin-lid. Blow after blow fell upon the wood, and at the thirty-first stroke the plank yielded, and the head of the coffin was forced open. Panting with her exertions, she cast a glance on the corpse preparatory to her further grim office, when, to her inexpressible horror, Chwang

sighed twice, opened his eyes, and sat up. With a piercing shriek she shrank backwards, and dropped the hatchet from her palsied hands.

"My dear wife," said the philosopher, "help me to rise."

Afraid to do anything else but obey, she assisted him out of the coffin and offered him support, while he led the way, lamp in hand, to her chamber. Remembering the sight that would there meet his eyes, the wretched woman trembled as they approached the door. What was her relief, however, to find that the Prince and his servant had disappeared. Taking advantage of this circumstance, she assumed every woman's wile, and in softest accents, said—



"She . . . dropped the hatchet from her palsied hands."

"Ever since your death you have been in my thoughts day and night. Just now, hearing a noise in your coffin, and remembering how, in the tales of old, souls are said to return to their bodies, the hope occurred to me that it might be so in your case, and I took a hatchet to open your coffin. Thank Heaven and Earth my felicity is complete; you are once more by my side."

"Many thanks, madam," said Chwang, "for your

deep consideration. But may I ask why you are dressed in such gay clothing."

"When I went to open your coffin, I had, as I say, a secret presentiment of my good fortune, and I dare not receive you back to life in mourning attire."

"Oh!" replied her husband, "but there is one other circumstance which I should like to have explained. Why was my coffin not placed in the saloon, but tossed into a ruined barn?"

To this question Lady T'ien's woman's wit failed to supply an answer. Chwang looked at the cups and wine which formed the relics of the marriage feast, but made no other remark thereon, except to tell his wife to warm him some wine. This she did, employing all her most engaging wiles to win a smile from her husband; but he steadily rejected her advances, and presently, pointing with his finger over her shoulder, he said—

"Look at those two men behind you."

She turned with an instinctive knowledge that she would see the Prince and his servant in the courtyard, and so she did. Horrified at the sight, she turned her eyes towards her husband, but he was not there. Again looking towards the courtyard she found that the Prince and his servant had now disappeared, and that Chwang was once more at her side. Perceiving then the true state of the case, that the Prince and his servant were but Chwang's other self, which he by his magical power was able to project into separate existences, she saw that all attempts at concealment were vain; and taking her

girdle from her waist, she tied it to a beam and hung herself on the spot.

So soon as life was extinct Chwang put his frail wife into the coffin from which he had lately emerged, and setting fire to his house, burnt it with its contents to ashes. The only things saved from the flames were the "Sûtra of Reason and of Virtue," and "The Classic of Nan-hwa," which were found by some neighbours, and carefully treasured.

As to Chwang, it is said that he set out as on a journey towards the West. What his ultimate destination was is not known, but one thing is certain, and that is, that he remained a widower for the rest of his life.

A CHINESE GIRL GRADUATE.

CHAPTER I.

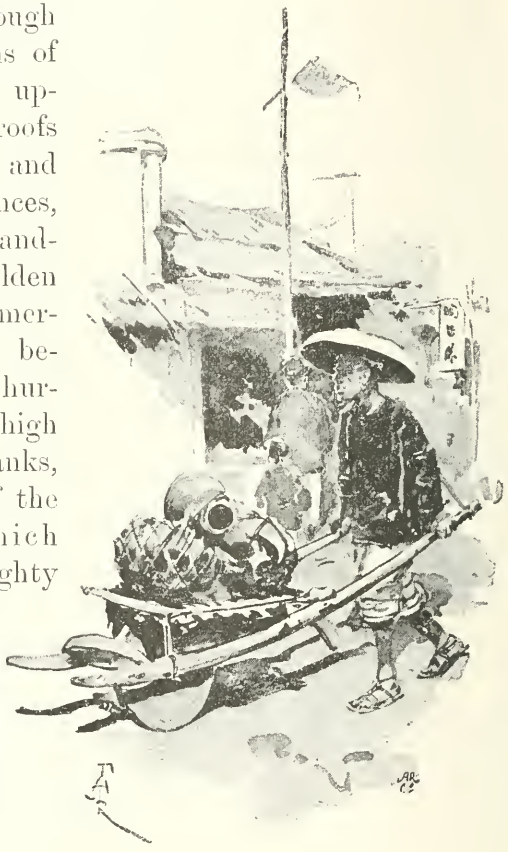
WHO among the three hundred million sons of Han does not know the saying—

"There's Paradise above,
'tis true;
But here below we've
Hang and Soo"?[1]

And though no one will deny the beauty of those far-famed cities, they cannot compare in grandeur of situation and boldness of features with many of the towns in the province of the "Four Streams." Foremost among the favoured spots of this part of the empire is Mienchu, which, as its name implies, is celebrated for the silky bamboos which grow in its immediate neighbourhood. These form, however,

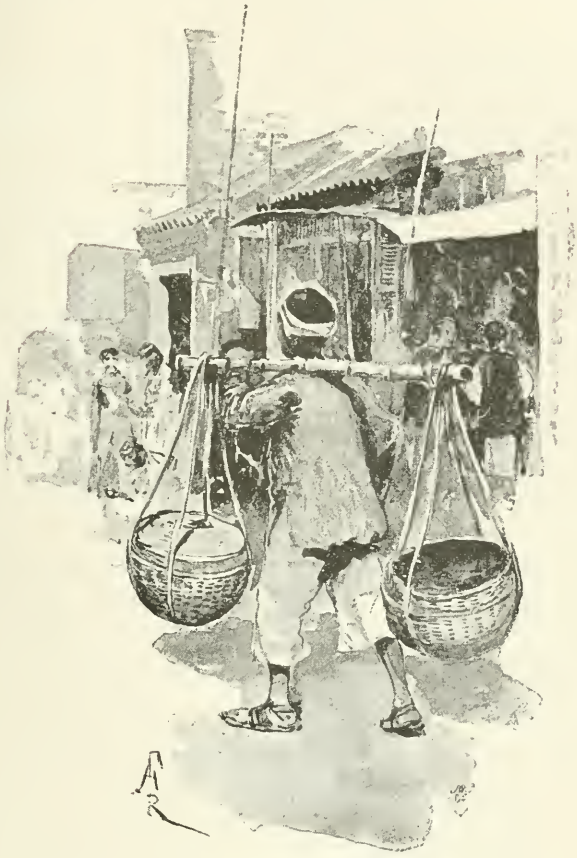
[1] Hangchow and Soochow.

only one of the features of its loveliness. Situated at the foot of a range of mountains which rise through all the gradations from rich and abundant verdure to the region of eternal snow, it lies embosomed in groves of beech, cypress, and bamboo, through the leafy screens of which rise the upturned yellow roofs of the temples and official residences, which dot the landscape like golden islands in an emerald sea; while beyond the wall hurries, between high and rugged banks, the tributary of the Fu river, which bears to the mighty waters of the Yangtsze-Kiang the goods and passengers which seek an outlet to the eastern provinces.



The streets within the walls of the city are scenes of life and bustle, while in the suburbs stand the residences of those who can afford to live in peace

and quiet, undisturbed by the clamour of the Les and Changs[1] of the town. There, in a situation



"The streets within the walls . . . are scenes of busy life."

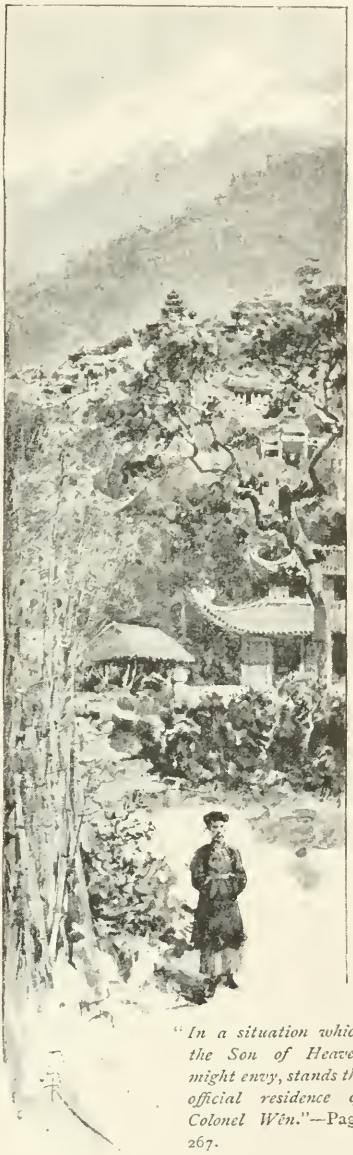
which the Son of Heaven might envy, stands the official residence of Colonel Wên. Outwardly it has all the appearance of a grandee's palace, and

[1] *I.e.*, the people. Le and Chang are the two commonest surnames in China.

within the massive boundary-walls which surround it, the courtyards, halls, grounds, summer-houses, and pavilions are not to be exceeded in grandeur and beauty. The office which had fallen to the lot of Colonel Wên was one of the most sought after in the province, and commonly only fell to officers of distinction. Though not without fame in the field, Colonel Wên's main claim to honour lay in the high degrees he had taken in the examinations. His literary acquirements gained him friends among the civil officers of the district, and the position he occupied was altogether one of exceptional dignity.

Unfortunately, his first wife had died, leaving only a daughter to keep her memory alive; but at the time when our story opens, his second spouse, more kind than his first, had presented him with a much-desired son. The mother of this boy was one of those bright, pretty, gay creatures who commonly gain the affections of men much older than themselves. She sang in the most faultless falsetto, she played the guitar with taste and expression, and she danced with grace and agility. What wonder, then, that when the Colonel returned from his tours of inspection and parades, weary with travel and dust, he found relief and relaxation in the joyous company of Hyacinth! And was she not also the mother of his son? Next to herself, there can be no question that this young gentleman held the chief place in the Colonel's affections; while poor Jasmine, his daughter by his first venture, was left very much to her own resources. No one troubled themselves about what she did, and she was allowed, as she grew up, to

follow her own pursuits and to give rein to her fancies without let or hindrance. From her earliest childhood one of her lonely amusements had been to dress as a boy, and so unchecked had the habit become, that she gradually drifted into the character which she had chosen to assume. She even persuaded her father to let her go to the neighbouring boys' school. Her mother had died before the Colonel had been posted to Mienchu, and among the people of that place, who had always seen her in boy's attire, she was regarded as an adopted son of her father. Hyacinth was only too glad to get her out of the way as much as possible, and so encouraged the idea of allowing her to learn to read and write in the company of their neighbours' urchins.

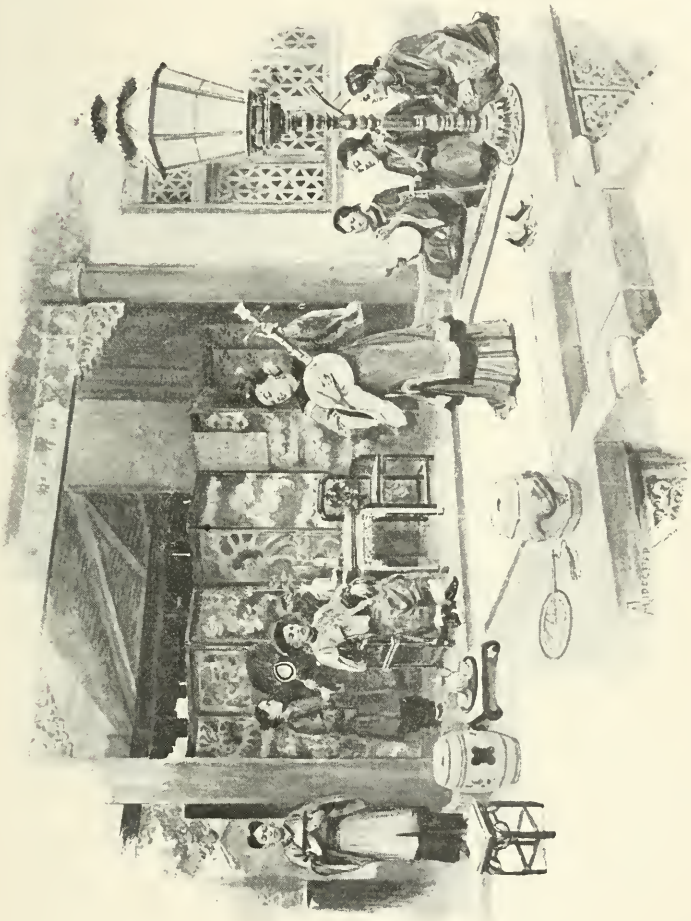


"*In a situation which the Son of Heaven might envy, stands the official residence of Colonel Wên.*"—Page 267.

Being bright and clever, she soon gained an intellectual lead among the boys, and her uncommon beauty, coupled with the magnetism belonging to her sex, secured for her a popularity which almost amounted to adoration. She was tall for her age, as are most young daughters of Han; and her perfectly oval face, almond-shaped eyes, willow-leaf eyebrows, small, well-shaped mouth, brilliantly white teeth, and raven-black hair, completed a face and figure which would have been noticeable anywhere. By the boys she was worshipped, and no undertaking was too difficult or too troublesome if it was to give pleasure to Tsunk'ing, or the "Young Noble," as she was called; for to have answered to the name of Jasmine would have been to proclaim her sex at once. Even the grim old master smiled at her through his horn spectacles as she entered the school-house of a morning, and any graceful turn in her poetry or scholarly diction in her prose was sure to win for her his unsparing praise. Many an evening he invited the "young noble" to his house to read over chapters from Confucius and the poems of Le Taipoh; and years afterwards, when he died, among his most cherished papers were found odes signed by Tsunk'ing in which there was a good deal about bending willows, light, flickering bamboos, horned moons, wild geese, the sound of a flute on a rainy day, and the pleasures of wine, in strict accord with the models set forth in the 'Aids to Poetry-Making' which are common in the land.

If it had not been for the indifference with which she was treated in her home, the favour with which

she was regarded abroad would have been most prejudicial to Jasmine; but any conceit which might have been engendered in the school-house was



"She sang in the most faultless falsetto, she played the guitar with taste and expression."—Page 268.

speedily counteracted when she got within the portals of the Colonel's domain. Coming into the

presence of her father and his wife, with all the incense of kindness, affection, and, it must be confessed, flattery with which she was surrounded by her schoolfellows fresh about her, was like stepping into a cold bath. Wholesome and invigorating the change may have been, but it was very unpleasant, and Jasmine often longed to be alone to give vent to her feelings in tears.

One deep consolation she had, however: she was a devoted student, and in the society of her books she forgot the callousness of her parents, and, living in imagination in the bygone annals of the empire, she was able to take part, as it were, in the great deeds which mark the past history of the State, and to enjoy the converse and society of the sages and poets of antiquity. When the time came that she had gained all the knowledge which the old schoolmaster could impart to her, she left the school, and formed a reading party with two youths of her own age. These lads, by name Wei and Tu, had been her schoolfellows, and were delighted at obtaining her promise to join them in their studies. So industriously were these pursued, that the three friends succeeded in taking their B.A. degree at the next examination, and, encouraged by this success, determined to venture on a struggle for a still higher distinction.

Though at one in their affection for Jasmine, Tu and Wei were unlike in everything else, which probably accounted for the friendship which existed between them. Wei was the more clever of the two. He wrote poetry with ease and fluency, and

his essays were marked by correctness of style and aptness of quotation. But there was a want of strength in his character. He was exceedingly vain, and was always seeking to excite admiration among his companions. This unhappy failing made him very susceptible of adverse criticism, and at the same time extremely jealous of any one who might happen to excel him in any way. Tu, on the other hand, though not so intellectually favoured, had a rough kind of originality, which always secured for his exercises a respectful attention, and made him at all times an agreeable companion. Having no exaggerated ideas of his capabilities, he never strove to appear otherwise than he was, and being quite independent of the opinions of others, he was always natural. Thus he was one who was sought out by his friends, and was best esteemed by those whose esteem was best worth having. In outward appearance the youths were as different as their characters were diverse. Wei was decidedly good-looking, but of a kind of beauty which suggested neither rest nor sincerity; while in Tu's features, though there was less grace, the want was fully compensated for by the strength and honest firmness of his countenance.

For both these young men Jasmine had a liking, but there was no question as to which she preferred. As she herself said, "Wei is pleasant enough as a companion, but if I had to look to one of them for an act of true friendship—or as a lover," she mentally added, "I should turn at once to Tu." It was one of her amusements to compare the young men in her mind, and one day when so occupied Tu

suddenly looked up from his book and said to her—

"What a pity it is that the gods have made us both men! If *I* were a woman, the object of my heart would be to be your wife, and if *you* were a woman, there is nothing I should like better than to be your husband."

Jasmine blushed up to the roots of her hair at having her own thoughts thus capped, as it were; but before she could answer, Wei broke in with—

"What nonsense you talk! And why, I should like to know, should you be the only one the 'young noble' might choose, supposing he belonged to the other sex?"

"You are both talking nonsense," said Jasmine, who had had time to recover her composure, "and remind me of my two old childless aunts," she added, laughing, "who are always quarrelling about the names they would have given their children if the goddess Kwanyin had granted them any half a century ago. As a matter of fact, we are three friends reading for our M.A. degrees, neither more nor less. And I will trouble you, my elder brother," she added, turning to Tu, "to explain to me what the poet means by the expression 'tuneful Tung' in the line—

'The greedy flames devour the tuneful Tung.'"

A learned disquisition by Tu on the celebrated musician who recognised the sonorous qualities of a piece of Tung timber burning in the kitchen fire,

effectually diverted the conversation from the inconvenient direction it had taken, and shortly afterwards Jasmine took her leave.

Haunted by the thought of what had passed, she wandered on to the verandah of her archery pavilion, and while gazing half-unconsciously heavenwards, her eyes were attracted by a hawk which flew past and alighted on a tree beyond the boundary-wall, and in front of the study she had lately left. In a restless and thoughtless mood, she took up her bow and arrow, and with unerring aim compassed the death of her victim. No sooner, however, had the hawk fallen, carrying the arrow with it, than she remembered that her name was inscribed on the shaft, and fearing lest it should be found by either Wei or Tu, she hurried round in the hope of recovering it. But she was too late. On approaching the study, she found Tu in the garden in front, examining the bird and arrow.

"Look," he said, as he saw her coming, "what a good shot some one has made! and whoever it is, he has a due appreciation of his own skill. Listen to these lines which are scraped on the arrow—

> 'Do not lightly draw your bow;
> But if you must, bring down your foe.'"

Jasmine was glad enough to find that he had not discovered her name, and eagerly exchanged banter with him on the conceit of the owner of the arrow. But before she could recover it, Wei, who had heard the talking and laughter, joined them, and took the arrow out of Tu's hand to examine it. Just at that

moment a messenger came to summon Tu to his father's presence, and he had no sooner gone than Wei exclaimed—

"She took up her bow and arrow, and with unerring aim compassed the death of her victim."

"But, see, here is the name of the mysterious owner of the arrow, and, as I live, it is a girl's name—Jasmine!

Who, among the goddesses of heaven, can Jasmine be?"

"Oh, I will take the arrow then," said Jasmine. "It must belong to my sister. That is her name."

"I did not know that you had a sister," said Wei.

"Oh yes, I have," answered Jasmine, quite forgetful of the celebrated dictum of Confucius—"Be truthful." "She is just one year younger than I am," she added, thinking it well to be circumstantial.

"Why have you never mentioned her?" asked Wei, with animation. "What is she like? Is she anything like you?"

"She is the very image of me."

"What! In height and features and ways?"

"The very image, so that people have often said that if we changed clothes each might pass for the other."

"What a good-looking girl she must be!" said Wei, laughing. "But, seriously, I have not, as you know, yet set up a household; and if your sister has not received bridal presents, I would beg to be allowed to invite her to enter my lowly habitation. What does my elder brother say to my proposal?"

"I don't know what my sister would feel about it," said Jasmine. "I would never answer for a girl, if I lived to be as old as the God of Longevity."

"Will you find out for me?"

"Certainly I will. But remember, not a word must be mentioned on the subject to my father, or, in fact, to anybody, until I give you leave."

"So long as my elder brother will undertake for me, I will promise anything," said the delighted

Wei. "I already feel as though I were nine-tenths of the way to the abode of the phœnix. Take this box of precious ointment to your sister as an earnest of my intentions, and I will keep the arrow as a token from her until she demands its return. I feel inclined to express myself in verse. May I?"

"By all means," said Jasmine, laughing.

Thus encouraged, Wei improvised as follows:—

> "'Twas sung of old that Lofu had no mate,
> Though Che was willing; for no word was said.
> At last an arrow like a herald came,
> And now an honoured brother lends his aid."

"Excellent," said Jasmine, laughing. "With such a poetic gift as you possess, you certainly deserve a better fate than befell Lofu."

From this day the idea of marrying Jasmine's sister possessed the soul of Wei. But not a word did he say to Tu on the matter, for he was conscious that, as Tu was the first to pick up the arrow through which he had become acquainted with the existence of Jasmine's sister, his friend might possibly lay a claim to her hand. To Jasmine also the subject was an absorbing one. She felt that she was becoming most unpleasantly involved in a risky matter, and that, if the time should ever come when she should have to make an explanation, she might in honour be compelled to marry Wei—a prospect which filled her with dismay. The turn events had taken had made her analyse her feelings more than she had ever done before, and the process made her doubly conscious of the depth of her affection for Tu. "A horse," she said to herself, "cannot carry two saddles,

and a woman cannot marry more than one man." Wise as this saw was, it did not help her out of her difficulty, and she turned to the chapter of accidents, and determined to trust to time, that old disposer of events, to settle the matter. But Wei was inclined to be impatient, and Jasmine was obliged to resort to more of those departures from truth which circumstances had forced upon this generally very upright young lady.

"I have consulted my father on the subject," she said to the expectant Wei, "and he insists on your waiting until the autumn examination is over. He has every confidence that you will then take your M.A. degree, and your marriage will, he hopes, put the coping-stone on your happiness and honour."

"That is all very well," said Wei; "but autumn is a long time hence, and how do I know that your sister may not change her mind?"

"Has not your younger brother undertaken to look after your interests, and cannot you trust him to do his best on your behalf?"

"I can trust my elder brother with anything in the world. It is your sister that I am afraid of," said Wei. "But since you will undertake for her——"

"No, no," said Jasmine, laughing, "I did not say that I would undertake for her. A man who answers for a woman deserves to have 'fool' written on his forehead."

"Well, at all events, I will be content to leave the matter in your hands," said Wei.

At last the time of the autumn examination drew near, and Tu and Wei made preparations for their

departure to the provincial capital. They were both bitterly disappointed when Jasmine announced that she was not going up that time. This determination was the result of a conference with her father. She had pointed out to the Colonel that if she passed and took her M.A. degree, she might be called upon to take office at any time, and that then she would be compelled to confess her sex; and as she was by no means disposed to give up the freedom which her doublet and hose conferred upon her, it was agreed between them that she should plead illness and not go up. Her two friends, therefore, went alone, and brilliant success attended their venture. They both passed with honours, and returned to Mienchu to receive the congratulations of their friends. Jasmine's delight was very genuine, more especially as regarded Tu, and the first evening was spent by the three students in joyous converse and in confident anticipations of the future. As Jasmine took leave of the two new M.A.'s, Wei followed her to the outer door and whispered at parting—

"I am coming to-morrow to make my formal proposal to your sister."

Jasmine had no time to answer, but went home full of anxious and disturbed thoughts, which were destined to take a more tragic turn than she had ever anticipated even in her most gloomy moments. The same cruel fate had also decreed that Wei's proposal was to be suspended, like Buddha, between heaven and earth. The blow fell upon him when he was attiring himself in the garments of his new degree, in preparation for his visit. He was in the act of tying

his sash and appending to it his purse and trinkets, when Jasmine burst into the young men's study, looking deadly pale and bearing traces of acute mental distress on her usually bright and joyous countenance.

"What is the matter?" cried Tu, with almost as

"The first evening was spent by the three students in joyous converse."

much agitation as was shown by Jasmine. "Tell me what has happened."

"Oh! my father, my poor father!" sobbed Jasmine.

"What is the matter with your father? He is not dead, is he?" cried the young men in one breath.

"No, it is not so bad as that," said Jasmine, "but a great and bitter misfortune has come upon us. As you know, some time ago my father had a quarrel with the Military Intendant, and that horrid man has, out of spite, brought charges against him for which he was carried off this morning to prison."

The statement of her misery and the shame involved in it completely unnerved poor Jasmine, who, true to her inner sex, burst into tears and rocked herself to and fro in her grief. Tu and Wei, on their knees before her, tried to pour in words of consolation. With a lack of reason which might be excused under the circumstances, they vowed that her father was innocent before they knew the nature of the charges against him, and they pledged themselves to rest neither day nor night until they had rescued him from his difficulty. When, under the influence of their genuine sympathy, Jasmine recovered some composure, Tu begged her to tell him of what her father was accused.

"The villain," said Jasmine, through her tears, "has dared to say that my father has made use of Government taxes, has taken bribes for recommending men for promotion, has appropriated the soldiers' ration-money, and has been in league with highwaymen."

"Is it possible?" said Tu, who was rather staggered by this long catalogue of crimes. "I should not have believed that any one could have ventured to have charged your honoured father with such things, least of all the Intendant, who is notoriously possessed of an itching palm. But I tell you what we can do

at once. Wei and I, being M.A.'s, have a right to call on the Prefect, and it will be a real pleasure to us to exercise our new privilege for the first time in your service. We will urge him to inquire into the matter, and I cannot doubt that he will at once quash the proceedings."

Unhappily, Tu's hopes were not realised. The

"Tu and Wei on their knees before her."

Prefect was very civil, but pointed out that, since a higher court had ordered the arrest of the Colonel, he was powerless to interfere in the matter. Many were the consultations held by the three friends, and much personal relief Jasmine got from the support and sympathy of the young men. One hope yet re-

mained to her: Tu and Wei were about to go to Peking for their doctor's degrees, and if they passed they might be able to bring such influence to bear as would secure the release of her father.

"Let not the 'young noble' distress himself overmuch," said Wei to her, with some importance. "This affair will be engraven on our hearts and minds, and if we take our degrees we will use our utmost exertions to wipe away the injustice which has been done your father."

"Unhappily," said the more practical Tu, "it is too plain that the examining magistrates are all in league to ruin him. But let our elder brother remain quietly at home, doing all he can to collect evidence in the Colonel's favour, while we will do our best at the capital. If things turn out well with us there, our elder brother had better follow at once to assist us with his advice."

Before the friends parted, Wei, whose own affairs were always his first consideration, took an opportunity of whispering to Jasmine, "Don't forget your honoured sister's promise, I beseech you. Whether we succeed or not, I shall ask for her in marriage on my return."

"Under present circumstances, we must no longer consider the engagement," said Jasmine, shocked at his introducing the subject at such a moment, "and the best thing that you can do is to forget all about it."

The moment for the departure of the young men had come, and they had no time to say more. With bitter tears, the two youths took leave of the weep-

ing Jasmine, who, as their carts disappeared in the distance, felt for the first time what it was to be alone in misery. She saw little of her stepmother in those dark days. That poor lady made herself so ill with unrestrained grief that she was quite incapable of rendering either help or advice. Fortunately the officials showed no disposition to proceed with the indictment, and by the judicious use of the money at her command Jasmine induced the prison authorities to make her father's confinement as little irksome as possible. She was allowed to see him at almost any time, and on one occasion, when he was enjoying her presence as in his prosperous days he had never expected to do, he remarked—

"Since the officials are not proceeding with the business, I think my best plan will be to send a petition to Peking asking the Board of War to acquit me. But my difficulty is, that I have no one whom I can send to look after the business."

"Let *me* go," said Jasmine. "When Tu and Wei were leaving, they begged me to follow them to consult as to the best means of helping you, and with them to depend on I have nothing to fear."

"I quite believe that you are as capable of managing the matter as anybody," said her father, admiringly; "but Peking is a long way off, and I cannot bear to think of the things which might happen to you on the road."

"From all time," answered Jasmine, "it has been considered the duty of a daughter to risk anything in the service of her father, and though the way is long, I shall have weapons to defend myself with against

injury, and a clear conscience with which to answer any interrogatories which may be put to me. Besides, I will take our messenger, 'The Dragon,' and his wife with me. I will make her dress as a man—what fun it will be to see Mrs Dragon's portly form in trousers and gaberdine! When that transformation is made, we shall be a party of three men. So, you see, she and I will have a man to protect us, and I shall have a woman to wait upon me; and if such a gallant company cannot travel from this to Peking in safety, I'll forswear boots and trousers and will retire into the harem for ever."

"Well," said her father, laughing, "if you can arrange in that way, go by all means, and the sooner you start the sooner I hope you will be back."

Delighted at having gained the approval of her father to her scheme, Jasmine quickly made the arrangements for her journey. On the morning of the day on which she was to start, the results of the doctors' examination at Peking reached Mienchu, and, to Jasmine's infinite delight, she found the names of Tu and Wei among the successful candidates. Armed with this good news, she hurried to the prison. All difficulties seemed to disappear like mist before the sun as she thought of the powerful advocates she now had at Peking.

"Tu and Wei have passed," she said, as she rushed into her father's presence, "and now the end of our troubles is approaching."

CHAPTER II.

With impatient hope Jasmine took leave of her father, and started on her eventful journey. As evening drew on she entered the suburbs of Ch'êngtu, the provincial capital, and sent "The Dragon" on to find a suitable inn for the couple of nights which she knew she would be compelled to spend in the city. "The Dragon" was successful in his search, and conducted Jasmine and his wife to a comfortable hostelry in one of the busiest parts of the town. Having refreshed herself with an excellent dinner, Jasmine was glad to rest from the fatigues and heat of the day in the cool courtyard into which her room opened. Fortune and builders had so arranged that a neighbouring house, towering above the inn, overlooked this restful spot, and one of the higher windows faced exactly the position which Jasmine had taken up. Such a fact would not, in ordinary circumstances, have troubled her in the least; but she had not been sitting long before she began to feel an extraordinary attraction towards the window. She did her best to look the other way, but she was often unconsciously impelled to glance up at the lattice. Once she fancied she saw the curtain move. Determined to verify her impression, she suddenly raised her eyes, after a prolonged contemplation of the pavement, and caught a momentary sight of a girl's face, which as instantly disappeared, but not

"As she passed through the courtyard she instinctively looked up at the window."

before Jasmine had been able to recognise that it was one of exceptional beauty.

"Now, if I were a young man," said she to herself, "I ought to feel my heart beat at the sight of such loveliness, and it would be my bounden duty to swear that I would win the owner of it in the teeth of dragons. But as my manhood goes no deeper than my outer garments, I can afford to sit here with a quiet pulse and a whole skin."

The next day Jasmine was busily engaged in interviewing some officials in the interest of her father, and only reached the shelter of her inn towards evening. As she passed through the courtyard she instinctively looked up at the window, and again caught a glimpse of the vision of beauty which she had seen the evening before. "If she only knew," thought Jasmine, "that I was such a one as herself, she would be less anxious to see me, and more likely to avoid me."

While amusing herself at the thought of the fair watcher, the inn-door opened, and a waiting-woman entered carrying a small box. As she approached Jasmine she bowed low, and with bated breath thus addressed her—

"May every happiness be yours, sir. My young lady, Miss King, whose humble dwelling is the adjoining house, seeing that you are living in solitude, has sent me with this fruit and tea as a complimentary offering."

So saying, she presented to Jasmine the box, which contained pears and a packet of scented tea.

"To what am I indebted for this honour?" replied

Jasmine; "I can claim no relationship with your lady, nor have I the honour of her acquaintance."

"My young lady says," answered the waiting-woman, "that among the myriads who come to this inn and the thousands who go from it, she has seen no one to equal your Excellency in form and feature. At sight of you she was confident that you came from

"She presented to Jasmine the box, which contained pears and a packet of scented tea."

a lofty and noble family, and having learnt from your attendants that you are the son of a colonel, she ventured to send you these trifles to supplement the needy fare of this rude inn."

"Tell me something about your young lady," said Jasmine, in a moment of idle curiosity.

"My young lady," said the woman, "is the daughter of Mr King, who was a vice-president of a lower court. Her father and mother having both visited the 'Yellow Springs,'[1] she is now living with an aunt, who has been blessed by the God of Wealth, and whose main object in life is to find a husband whom her niece may be willing to marry. The young gentleman, my young lady's cousin, is one of the richest men in Ch'êngtu. All the larger inns belong to him, and his profits are as boundless as the four seas. He is as anxious as his mother to find a suitable match for the young lady, and has promised that so soon as she can make a choice he will arrange the wedding."

"I should have thought," said Jasmine, "that, being the owner of so much wealth and beauty, the young lady would have been besieged by suitors from all parts of the empire."

"So she is," said the woman, "and from her window yonder she espies them, for they all put up at this inn. Hitherto she has made fun of them all, and describes their appearance and habits in the most amusing way. 'See this one,' says she, 'with his bachelor cap on and his new official clothes and awkward gait, looking for all the world like a barn-door fowl dressed up as a stork; or that one, with his round shoulders, monkey-face, and crooked legs;' and so she tells them off."

"What does she say of me, I wonder?" said Jasmine, amused.

"Of your Excellency she says that her comparisons

[1] Hades.

fail her, and that she can only hope that the Fates who guided your jewelled chariot hitherwards will not tantalise her by an empty vision, but will bind your ankles to hers with the red matrimonial cords."

"How can I hope for such happiness?" said Jasmine, smiling. "But please to tell your young lady that, being only a guest at this inn, I have nothing worthy of her acceptance to offer in return for her bounteous gifts, and that I can only assure her of my boundless gratitude."

With many bows, and with reiterated wishes for Jasmine's happiness and endless longevity, the woman took her leave.

"Truly this young lady has formed a most perverted attachment," said Jasmine to herself. "She reminds me of the man in the fairy tale who fell in love with a shadow, and, so far as I can see, she is not likely to get any more satisfaction out of it than he did." So saying, she took up a pencil and scribbled the following lines on a scrap of paper:—

"With thoughts as ardent as a quenchless thirst,
She sends me fragrant and most luscious fruit;
Without a blush she seeks a phœnix guest[1]
Who dwells alone like case-enveloped lute."

After this mental effort Jasmine went to bed. Nor had her interview with the waiting-woman made a sufficient impression on her mind to interfere in any way with her sleep. She was surprised, however, on coming into her sitting-room in the morning, to meet the same messenger, who, laden with a dish

[1] A bachelor.

of hot eggs and a brew of tea, begged Jasmine "to deign to look down upon her offerings."

"Many thanks," said Jasmine, "for your kind attention."

"You are putting the saddle on the wrong horse," replied the woman. "In bringing you these I am but obeying the orders of Miss King, who herself made the tea of leaves from Pu-êrh in Yunnan, and who with her own fair hands shelled the eggs."

"Your young lady," answered Jasmine, "is as bountiful as she is kind. What return can I make her for her kindness to a stranger? Stay," she said, as the thought crossed her mind that the verses she had written the night before might prove a wholesome tonic for this effusive young lady, "I have a few verses which I will venture to ask her to accept." So saying, she took a piece of peach-blossom paper, on which she carefully copied the quatrain and handed it to the woman. "May I trouble you," said she, "to take this to your mistress?"

"If," said Jasmine to herself as the woman took her departure, "Miss King is able to penetrate the meaning of my verses, she won't like them. Without saying so in so many words, I have told her with sufficient plainness that I will have nothing to say to her. But stupidity is a shield sent by Providence to protect the greater part of mankind from many evils; so perhaps she will escape."

It certainly in this case served to shield Miss King from Jasmine's shafts. She was delighted at receiving the verses, and at once sat down to compose a

quatrain to match Jasmine's in reply. With infinite labour she elaborated the following :—

"Sung Yuh on th' eastern wall sat deep in thought,
And longed with P'e to pluck the fragrant fruit.
If all the well-known tunes be newly set,
What use to take again the half-burnt lute?"

Having copied these on a piece of silk-woven paper, she sent them to Jasmine by her faithful attendant. On looking over the paper, Jasmine said, smiling: "What a clever young lady your mistress must be! These lines, though somewhat inconsequential, are incomparable."

But, though Jasmine was partly inclined to treat the matter as a joke, she saw that there was a serious side to the affair, more especially as the colours under which she was sailing were so undeniably false. She knew well that for Sung Yuh should be read Miss King, and for P'e her own name; and she determined, therefore, to put an end to the philandering of Miss King, which, in her present state of mind, was doubly annoying to her.

"I am deeply indebted to your young lady," she said, and then, being determined to make a plunge into the morass of untruthfulness, for a good end as she believed, added: "and, if I had love at my disposal, I should possibly venture to make advances towards the feathery peach;[1] but let me confess to you that I have already taken to myself a wife. Had I had the felicity of meeting Miss King before I committed myself in another direction, I might, perhaps, have been a happier man. But, after all, if

[1] A nuptial emblem.

this were so, my position is no worse than that of most other married men, for I never met one who was not occasionally inclined to cry, like the boys at 'toss cash,' 'Hark back and try again.'"

"This will be sad news for my lady, for she has set her heart upon you ever since you first came to the inn; and when young misses take that sort of fancy and lose the objects of their love, they are as bad as children when forbidden their sugar-plums. But what's the use of talking to you about a young lady's feelings!" said the woman, with a vexed toss of her head; "I never knew a man who understood a woman yet."

"I am extremely sorry for Miss King," said Jasmine, trying to suppress a smile. "As you wisely remark, a young lady is a sealed book to me, but I have always been told that their fancies are as variable as the shadow of the bamboo; and probably, therefore, though Miss King's sky may be overcast just now, the gloom will only make her enjoy to-morrow's sunshine all the more."

The woman, who was evidently in a hurry to convey the news to her mistress, returned no answer to this last sally, but, with curtailed obeisance, took her departure.

Her non-appearance the next morning confirmed Jasmine in the belief that her bold departure from truth on the previous evening had had its curative effect. The relief was great, for she had felt that these complications were becoming too frequent to be pleasant, and, reprehensible though it may appear, her relief was mingled with no sort of compassion for

Miss King. Hers was not a nature to sympathise with such sudden and fierce attachments. Her affection for Tu had been the growth of many months, and she had no feeling in common with a young lady who could take a violent liking for a young man simply from seeing him taking his post-prandial ease. It was therefore with complete satisfaction that she left the inn in the course of the morning to pay her farewell visits to the Governor and the Judge of the province, who had taken an ususual interest in Colonel Wên's case since Jasmine had become his personal advocate. Both officials had promised to do all they could for the prisoner, and had loaded Jasmine with tokens of goodwill in the shape of strange and rare fruits and culinary delicacies. On this particular day the Governor had invited her to the mid-day meal, and it was late in the afternoon before she found her way back to the inn.

The following morning she rose early, intending to start before noon, and was stepping into the courtyard to give directions to "The Dragon" when, to her surprise, she was accosted by Miss King's servant, who, with a waggish smile and a cunning shake of the head, said—

"How can one so young as your Excellency be such a proficient in the art of inventing flowers of the imagination?"

"What do you mean?" said Jasmine.

"Why, last night you told me you were married, and my poor young lady when she heard it was wrung with grief. But, recovering somewhat, she sent me to ask your servants whether what you had

said was true or not, for she knows what she's about as well as most people, and they both with one voice assured me that, far from being married, you had not even exchanged nuptial presents with anybody. You may imagine Miss King's delight when I took her this news. She at once asked her cousin to call upon you to make a formal offer of marriage, and she has now sent me to tell you that he will be here anon."

Every one knows what it is to pass suddenly from a state of pleasurable high spirits into deep despondency, to exchange in an instant bright mental sunshine for cloud and gloom. All, therefore, must sympathise with poor Jasmine, who, believing the road before her to be smooth and clear, on a sudden became thus aware of a most troublesome and difficult obstruction. She had scarcely finished calling down anathemas on the heads of "The Dragon" and his wife, and cursing her own folly for bringing them with her, than the inn-doors were thrown open, and a servant appeared carrying a long red visiting-card inscribed with the name of the wealthy inn-proprietor. On the heels of this forerunner followed young Mr King, who, with effusive bows, said, "I have ventured to pay my respects to your Excellency."

Poor Jasmine was so upset by the whole affair that she lacked some of the courtesy that was habitual to her, and in her confusion very nearly seated her guest on her right hand. Fortunately this outrageous breach of etiquette was avoided, and the pair eventually arranged themselves in the canonical order.

"This old son of Han," began Mr King, "would not have dared to intrude himself upon your Excellency

if it were not that he has a matter of great delicacy to discuss with you. He has a cousin, the daughter of Vice-President King, for whom for years he has been trying to find a suitable match. The position is peculiar, for the lady declares positively that she will not marry any one she has not seen and approved of. Until now she has not been able to find any one whom she would care to marry. But the presence of your Excellency has thrown a light across her path which has shown her the way to the plum-groves of matrimonial felicity."

Here King paused, expecting some reply; but Jasmine was too absorbed in thought to speak, so Mr King went on—

"This old son of Han, hearing that your Excellency is still unmarried, has taken upon himself to make a proposal of marriage to you, and to offer his cousin as your 'basket and broom.'[1] His interview with you has, he may say, shown him the wisdom of his cousin's choice, and he cannot imagine a pair better suited for one another, or more likely to be happy, than your Excellency and his cousin."

"I dare not be anything but straightforward with your worship," said Jasmine, "and I am grateful for the extraordinary affection your cousin has been pleased to bestow upon me; but I cannot forget that she belongs to a family which is entitled to pass through the gate of the palace,[2] and I fear that my rank is not sufficient for her. Besides, my father is at present under a cloud, and I am now on my way to Peking to try to release him from his difficulties.

[1] Wife.

[2] A family of distinction.

It is no time, therefore, for me to be binding myself with promises."

"As to your Excellency's first objection," replied King, "you are already the wearer of a hat with a silken tassel, and a man need not be a prophet to foretell that in time to come any office, either civil or military, will be within your reach. No doubt, also, your business in Peking will be quickly brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and there can be no objection, therefore, to our settling the preliminaries now, and then, on your return from the capital, we can celebrate the wedding. This will give rest and composure to my cousin's mind, which is now like a disturbed sea, and will not interfere, I venture to think, with the affair which calls you to Peking."

As King proceeded, Jasmine felt that her difficulties were on the increase. It was impossible that she should explain her position in full, and she had no sufficient reason at hand to give for rejecting the proposal made her, though, at the same time, her annoyance was not small at having such a matter forced upon her at a moment when her mind was filled with anxieties. "Then," she thought to herself, "there is ahead of me that explanation which must inevitably come with Wei; so that, altogether, if it were not for the deeply rooted conviction which I have that Tu will be mine at last, when he knows what I really am, life would not be worth having. As for this inn-proprietor, if he has so little delicacy as to push his cousin upon me at this crisis, I need not have any compunction regarding him; so, perhaps, my easiest way of getting out of

the present hobble will be to accept his proposal and to present the box of precious ointment handed me by Wei for my sister to this ogling love-sick girl." So turning to King, she said—

"Since you, sir, and your cousin have honoured me with your regard, I dare not altogether decline your proposal, and I would therefore beg you, sir, to hand this," she added, producing the box of ointment, "to your honourable cousin, as a token of the bond between us, and to convey to her my promise that, if I don't marry her, I will never marry another lady."

Mr King, with the greatest delight, received the box, and handing it to the waiting-woman, who stood expectant by, bade her carry it to her mistress, with the news of the engagement. Jasmine now hoped that her immediate troubles were over, but King insisted on celebrating the event by a feast, and it was not until late in the afternoon that she succeeded in making a start. Once on the road, her anxiety to reach Peking was such that she travelled night and day, "feeding on wind and lodging in water." Nor did she rest until she reached an hotel within the Hata Gate of the capital.

CHAPTER III.

JASMINE'S solitary journey had given her abundant time for reflection, and for the first time she had set herself seriously to consider her position. She recognised that she had hitherto followed only the impulses of the moment, of which the main one had been the desire to escape complications by the wholesale sacrifice of truth; and she acknowledged to herself that, if justice were evenly dealt out, there must be a Nemesis in store for her which should bring distress and possibly disaster upon her. In her calmer moments she felt an instinctive foreboding that she was approaching a crisis in her fate, and it was with mixed feelings, therefore, that on the morning after her arrival she prepared to visit Tu and Wei, who were as yet ignorant of her presence.

She dressed herself with more than usual care for the occasion, choosing to attire herself in a blue silk robe and a mauve satin jacket which Tu had once admired, topped by a brand-new cap. Altogether her appearance as she passed through the streets justified the remark made by a passer-by: "A pretty youngster, and more like a maiden of eighteen than a man."

The hostelry at which Tu and Wei had taken up their abode was an inn befitting the dignity of such distinguished scholars. On inquiring at the door, Jasmine was ushered by a servant through a courtyard to an inner enclosure, where, under the grateful

shade of a wide-spreading cotton-tree, Tu was reclining at his ease. Jasmine's delight at meeting her friend was only equalled by the pleasure with which Tu greeted her. In his strong and gracious presence she became conscious that she was released from the absorbing care which had haunted her, and her soul leaped out in new freedom as she asked and answered questions of her friend. Each had much to say, and

"Tu was reclining at his ease."

it was not for some time, when an occasional reference brought his name forward, that Jasmine noticed the absence of Wei. When she did, she asked after him.

"He left this some days ago," said Tu, "having some special business which called for his presence at home. He did not tell me what it was, but doubtless it was something of importance."

Jasmine said nothing, but felt pretty certain in her mind as to the object of his hasty return.

Tu, attributing her silence to a reflection on Wei for having left the capital before her father's affair was settled, hastened to add—

"He was very helpful in the matter of your honoured father's difficulty, and only left when he thought he could not do any more."

"How do matters stand now?" asked Jasmine, eagerly.

"We have posted a memorial at the palace gate," said Tu, "and have arranged that it shall reach the right quarter. Fortunately, also, I have an acquaintance in the Board of War who has undertaken to do all he can in that direction, and promises an answer in a few days."

"I have brought with me," said Jasmine, "a petition prepared by my father. What do you think about presenting it?"

"At present I believe that it would only do harm. A superabundance of memorials is as bad as none at all. Beyond a certain point, they only irritate officials."

"Very well," said Jasmine; "I am quite content to leave the conduct of affairs in your hands."

"Well then," said Tu, "that being understood, I propose that you should move your things over to this inn. There is Wei's room at your disposal, and your constant presence here will be balm to my lonely spirit. At the Hata Gate you are almost as remote as if you were in our study at Mienchu."

Jasmine was at first startled by this proposal.

Though she had been constantly in the company of Tu, she had never lived under the same roof with him, and she at once recognised that there might be difficulties in the way of her keeping her secret if she were to be constantly under the eyes of her friend. But she had been so long accustomed to yield to the present circumstances, and was so confident that Fortune, which, with some slight irregularities, had always stood her friend, would not desert her on the present occasion, that she gave way.

"By all means," she said. "I will go back to my inn, and bring my things at once. This writing-case I will leave here. I brought it because it contains my father's petition."

So saying, she took her leave, and Tu retired to his easy-chair under the cotton-tree. But the demon of curiosity was abroad, and alighting on the arm of Tu's chair, whispered in his ear that it might be well if he ran his eye over Colonel Wên's petition to see if there was any argument in it which he had omitted in his statement to the Board of War. At first Tu, whose nature was the reverse of inquisitive, declined to listen to these promptings, but so persistent did they become that he at last put down his book—'The Spring and Autumn Annals'—and, seating himself at the sitting-room table, opened the writing-case so innocently left by Jasmine. On the top were a number of red visiting-cards bearing the inscription, in black, of Wên Tsunk'ing, and beneath these was the petition. Carefully Tu read it through, and passed mental eulogies on it as he proceeded. The Colonel had put his case skilfully, but Tu had no difficulty in

recognising Jasmine's hand, both in the composition of the document and in the penmanship. "If my attempt," he thought, "does not succeed, we will try what this will do." He was on the point of returning it to its resting-place, when he saw another document in Jasmine's handwriting lying by it. This was evidently a formal document, probably connected, as he thought, with the Colonel's case, and he therefore unfolded it and read as follows :—

"The faithful maiden, Miss Wên of Mienchu Hien, with burning incense reverently prays the God of War to release her father from his present difficulties, and speedily to restore peace to her own soul by nullifying, in accordance with her desire, the engagement of the bamboo arrow and the contract of the box of precious ointment. A respectful petition."

As Tu read on, surprise and astonishment took possession of his countenance. A second time he read it through, and then, throwing himself back in his chair, broke out into a fit of laughter.

"So," he said to himself, "I have allowed myself to be deceived by a young girl all these years. And yet not altogether deceived," he added, trying to find an excuse for himself; "for I have often fancied that there was the savour of a woman about the 'young noble.' I hope she is not one of those heaven-born genii who appear on earth to plague men, and who, just when they have aroused the affections they wished to excite, ascend through the air and leave their lovers mourning."

Just at this moment the door opened, and Jasmine entered, looking more lovely than ever, with the flush

begotten by exercise on her beautifully moulded cheeks. At sight of her Tu again burst out laughing, to Jasmine's not unnatural surprise, who, thinking that there must be something wrong with her dress, looked herself up and down, to the increasing amusement of Tu.

"So," said he at last, "you deceitful little hussy, you have been deceiving me all these years by passing yourself off as a man, when in reality you are a girl."

Overcome with confusion, Jasmine hung her head, and murmured—

"Who has betrayed me?"

"You have betrayed yourself," said Tu, holding up the incriminating document; "and here we have the story of the arrow with which you shot the hawk, but what the box of precious ointment means I don't know."

Confronted with this overwhelming evidence, poor Jasmine remained speechless, and dared not even lift her eyes to glance at Tu. That young man, seeing her distress, and being in no wise possessed by the scorn which he had put into his tone, crossed over to her and gently led her to a seat by him.

"Do you remember," he said, in so altered a voice that Jasmine's heart ceased to throb as if it wished to force an opening through the finely formed bosom which enclosed it, "on one occasion in our study at home I wished that you were a woman that you might become my wife? Little did I think that my wish might be gratified. Now it is, and I beseech you to let us join our lives in one, and seek the happiness of the gods in each other's perpetual presence."

But, as if suddenly recollecting herself, Jasmine withdrew her hand from his, and, standing up before him with quivering lip and eyes full of tears, said—

"No. It can never be."

"Why not?" said Tu, in alarmed surprise.

"Because I am bound to Wei."

"What! Does Wei know your secret?"

"No. But do you remember when I shot that arrow in front of your study?"

"Perfectly," said Tu. "But what has that to do with it?"

"Why, Wei discovered my name on the shaft, and I, to keep my secret, told him that it was my sister's name. He then wanted to marry my sister, and I undertook, fool that I was, to arrange it for him. Now I shall be obliged to confess the truth, and he will have a right to claim me instead of my supposed sister."

"But," said Tu, "I have a prior right to that of Wei, for it was I who found the arrow. And in this matter I shall be ready to outface him at all hazards. But," he added, "Wei, I am sure, is not the man to take an unfair advantage of you."

"Do you really think so?" asked Jasmine.

"Certainly I do," said Tu.

"Then—then—I shall be—very glad," said poor Jasmine, hesitatingly, overcome with bashfulness, but full of joy.

At which gracious consent Tu recovered the hand which had been withdrawn from his, and Jasmine sank again into the chair at his side.

"But, Tu, dear," she said, after a pause, "there is something else that I must tell you before I can feel that my confessions are over."

"What! You have not engaged yourself to any one else, have you?" said Tu, laughing.

"Yes, I have," she replied, with a smile; and she then gave her lover a full and particular account of how Mr King had proposed to her on behalf of his cousin, and how she had accepted her.

"How could you frame your lips to utter such untruths?" said Tu, half laughing, and half in earnest.

"Oh, Tu, falsehood is so easy and truth so difficult sometimes. But I feel that I have been very, very wicked," said poor Jasmine, covering her face with her hands.

"Well, you certainly have got yourself into a pretty hobble. So far as I can make out, you are at the present moment engaged to one young lady and two young men."

The situation, thus expressed, was so comical, that Jasmine could not refrain from laughing through her tears; but, after a somewhat lengthened consultation with her lover, her face recovered its wonted serenity, and round it hovered a halo of happiness which added light and beauty to every feature. There is something particularly entrancing in receiving the first confidences of a pure and loving soul. So Tu thought on this occasion, and while Jasmine was pouring the most secret workings of her inmost being into his ear, those lines of the poet of the Sung dynasty came irresistibly into his mind:—

"'Tis sweet to see the flowers woo the sun,
To watch the quaint wiles of the cooing dove,
But sweeter far to hear the dulcet tones
Of her one loves confessing her great love."

But there is an end to everything, even to the 'Confucian Analects,' and so there was also to this lovers' colloquy. For just as Jasmine was explaining, for the twentieth time, the origin and basis of her love for Tu, a waiter entered to announce the arrival of her luggage.

"I don't know quite," said Tu, "where we are to put your two men. But, by the by," he added, as the thought struck him, "did you really travel all the way in the company of these two men only?"

"Oh, Tu," said Jasmine, laughing, "I have something else to confess to you."

"What! another lover?" said Tu, affecting horror and surprise.

"No; not another lover, but another woman. The short, stout one is a woman, and came as my maid. She is the wife of 'The Dragon.'"

"Well, now have you told me all? For I am getting so confused about the people you have transformed from women to men, that I shall have doubts about my own sex next."

"Yes, Tu, dear; now you know all," said Jasmine, laughing. But not all the good news which was in store for him, for scarcely had Jasmine done speaking when a letter arrived from his friend in the Board of War, who wrote to say that he had succeeded in getting the Military Intendant of Mienchu transferred to a post in the province of Kwangsi,

and that the departure of this noxious official would mean the release of the Colonel, as he alone was the Colonel's accuser. This news added one more note to the chord of joy which had been making harmony in Jasmine's heart for some hours, and readily she agreed with Tu that they should set off homewards on the following morning.

Colonel Wén.

With no such adventure as that which had attended Jasmine's journey to the capital, they reached Mienchu, and, to their delight, were received by the Colonel in his own *ya-mun*. After congratulating him on his release, which Jasmine took care he should understand was due entirely to Tu's exertions,

she gave him a full account of her various experiences on the road and at the capital.

"It is like a story out of a book of marvels," said her father, "and even now you have not exhausted all the necessary explanations. For, since my release, your friend Wei has been here to ask for my daughter in marriage. From some questions I put to him, he is evidently unaware that you are my only daughter, and I therefore put him off and told him to wait until you returned. He is in a very impatient state, and, no doubt, will be over shortly."

Nor was the Colonel wrong, for almost immediately Wei was announced, who, after expressing the genuine pleasure he felt at seeing Jasmine again, began at once on the subject which filled his mind.

"I am so glad," he said, "to have this opportunity of asking you to explain matters. At present I am completely nonplussed. On my return from Peking I inquired of one of your father's servants about his daughter. 'He has not got one,' quoth the man. I went to another, and he said, 'You mean the "young noble," I suppose.' 'No, I don't,' I said, 'I mean his sister.' 'Well, that is the only daughter I know of,' said he. Then I went to your father, and all I could get out of him was, 'Wait until the "young noble" comes home.' Please tell me what all this means."

"Your great desire is to marry a beautiful and accomplished girl, is it not?" said Jasmine.

"That certainly is my wish," said Wei.

"Well, then," said Jasmine, "I can assure you

that your betrothal present is in the hand of such a one, and a girl whom to look at is to love."

"That may be," said Wei, "but my wish is to marry your sister."

"Will you go and talk to Tu about it?" said Jasmine, who felt that the subject was becoming too difficult for her, and whose confidence in Tu's wisdom was unbounded, "and he will explain it all to you."

Even Tu, however, found it somewhat difficult to explain Jasmine's sphinx-like mysteries, and on certain points Wei showed a disposition to be anything but satisfied. Jasmine's engagement to Tu implied his rejection, and he was disposed to be splenetic and disagreeable about it. His pride was touched, and in his irritation he was inclined to impute treachery to his friend and deceit to Jasmine. To the first charge Tu had a ready answer, but the second was all the more annoying because there was some truth in it. However, Tu was not in the humour to quarrel, and being determined to seek peace and ensue it, he overlooked Wei's innuendoes and made out the best case he could for his bride. On Miss King's beauty, virtues, and ability he enlarged with a wealth of diction and power of imagination which astonished himself, and Jasmine also, to whom he afterwards repeated the conversation. "Why, Tu, dear," said that artless maiden, "how can you know all this about Miss King? You have never seen her, and I am sure I never told you half of all this."

"Don't ask questions," said the enraptured Tu. "Let it be enough for you to know that Wei is as

eager for the possession of Miss King as he was for your sister, and that he has promised to be my best-man at our wedding to-morrow."

And Wei was as good as his word. With every

"With every regard to ceremony and ancient usage, the marriage of Tu and Jasmine was celebrated in the presence of relatives and friends."

regard to ceremony and ancient usage, the marriage of Tu and Jasmine was celebrated in the presence of relatives and friends, who, attracted by the novelty

of the antecedent circumstances, came from all parts of the country to witness the nuptials. By Tu's especial instructions also a prominence was allowed to Wei, which gratified his vanity, and smoothed down the ruffled feathers of his conceit.

Jasmine thought that no time should be lost in reducing Miss King to the same spirit of acquiescence to which Wei had been brought, and on the evening of her wedding-day she broached the subject to Tu.

"I shall not feel, Tu, dear," she said, "that I have gained absolution for my many deceptions until that very forward Miss King has been talked over into marrying Wei; and I insist, therefore," she added, with an amount of hesitancy which reduced the demand to the level of a plaintive appeal, "that we start to-morrow for Ch'êngtu to see the young woman."

"Ho! ho!" replied Tu, intensely amused at her attempted bravado. "These are brave words, and I suppose that I must humbly register your decrees."

"Oh, Tu! you know what I mean. You know that, like a child who takes a delight in conquering toy armies, I love to fancy that I can command so strong a man as you are. But, Tu, if you knew how absolutely I rely on your judgment, you would humour my folly and say 'yes.'"

There was a subtle incense of love and flattery about this appeal which, backed as it was by a look of tenderness and beauty, made it irresistible; and the arrangements for the journey were made in strict accordance with Jasmine's wishes.

On arriving at the inn which was so full of chasten-

ing memories to Jasmine, Tu sent his card to Mr King, who, flattered by the attention paid him by so eminent a scholar, cordially invited Tu to his house.

"To what," he said, as Tu, responding to his invitation, entered his reception-hall, "am I to attribute the honour of receiving your illustrious steps in my mean apartments?"

"I have heard," said Tu, "that the beautiful Miss King is your Excellency's cousin, and having a friend who is desirous of gaining her hand, I have come to plead on his behalf."

"I regret to say," replied King, "that your Excellency has come too late, as she has already received an engagement token from a Mr Wên, who passed here lately on his way to Peking."

"Mr Wên is a friend of mine also," said Tu, "and it was because I knew that his troth was already plighted that I ventured to come on behalf of him of whom I have spoken."

"Mr Wên," said King, "is a gentleman and a scholar, and having given a betrothal present, he is certain to communicate with us direct in case of any difficulty."

"Will you, old gentleman,"[1] said Tu, producing the lines which Miss King had sent Jasmine, "just cast your eyes over these verses, written to Wên by your cousin? Feeling most regretfully that he was unable to fulfil his engagement, Wên gave these to me as a testimony of the truth of what I now tell you."

King took the paper handed him by Tu, and recognised at a glance his cousin's handwriting.

[1] A term of respect.

"Alas!" he said, "Mr Wên told us he was engaged, but, not believing him, I urged him to consent to marry my cousin. If you will excuse me, sir," he added, "I will consult with the lady as to what should be done."

After a short absence he returned.

"My cousin is of opinion," he said, "that she cannot enter into any new engagement until Mr Wên has come here himself and received back the betrothal present which he gave her on parting."

"I dare not deceive you, old gentleman, and will tell you at once that that betrothal present was not Wên's, but was my unworthy friend Wei's, and came into Wên's possession in a way that I need not now explain."

"Still," said King, "my cousin thinks Mr Wên should present himself here in person and tell his own story; and I must say that I am of her opinion."

"It is quite impossible that Mr Wên should return here," replied Tu; "but my 'stupid thorn'[1] is in the adjoining hostelry, and would be most happy to explain fully to Miss King Wên's entire inability to play the part of a husband to her."

"If your honourable consort would meet my cousin, she, I am sure, will be glad to talk the matter over with her."

With Tu's permission, Miss King's maid was sent to the inn to invite Jasmine to call on her mistress. The maid, who was the same who had acted as Miss King's messenger on the former occasion, glanced long and earnestly at Jasmine. Her features were

[1] Wife.

familiar to her, but she could not associate them with any lady of her acquaintance. As she conducted her to Miss King's apartments, she watched her stealthily, and became more and more puzzled by her appearance. Miss King received her with civility, and after exchanging wishes that each might be granted ten thousand blessings, Jasmine said, smiling—

"Do you recognise Mr Wên?"

Miss King looked at her, and seeing in her a likeness to her beloved, said—

"What relation are you to him, lady?"

"I am his very self!" said Jasmine.

Miss King opened her eyes wide at this startling announcement, and gazed earnestly at her.

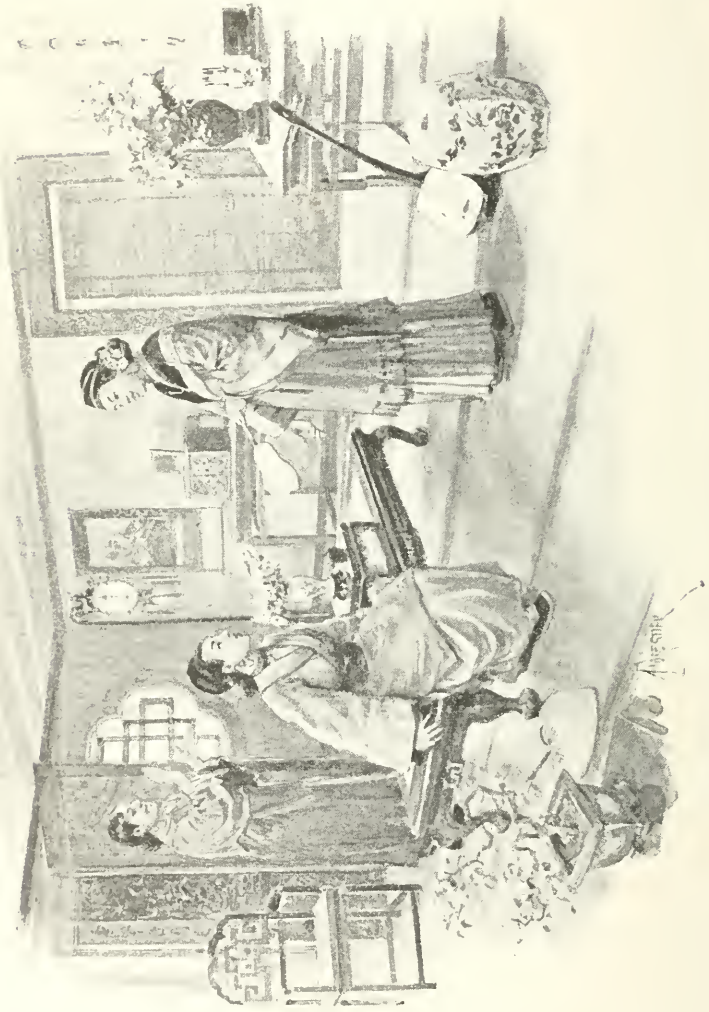
"Haiyah!" cried her maid, clapping her hands, "I thought there was a wonderful likeness between the lady and Mr Wên. But who would have thought that she was he?"

"But what made you disguise yourself in that fashion?" asked Miss King, in an abashed and somewhat vexed tone.

"My father was in difficulties," said Jasmine, "and as it was necessary that I should go to Peking to plead for him, I dressed as a man for the convenience of travel. You will remember that in the first instance I declined your flattering overtures, but when I found that you persisted in your proposal, not being able to explain the truth, I thought the best thing to do was to hand you my friend's betrothal present which I had with me, intending to return and explain matters. And you will admit that in one thing I was truthful."

"What was that?" asked the maid.

"Why," answered Jasmine, "I said that if I did



"Miss King opened her eyes wide at this startling announcement."

not marry your lady I would never marry any woman."

"Well, yes," said the maid, laughing, "you have kept your faith royally there."

"The friend I speak of," continued Jasmine, "has now taken his doctor's degree, and this stupid husband and wife have come from Mienchu to make you a proposal on his behalf."

Miss King was not one who could readily take in an entirely new and startling idea, and she sat with a half-dazed look staring at Jasmine without uttering a word. If it had not been for the maid, the conversation would have ceased, but that young woman was determined to probe the matter to the bottom.

"You have not told us," she said, "the gentleman's name. And will you explain why you call him your friend? How could you be on terms of friendship with him?"

"From my childhood," said Jasmine, "I have always dressed as a boy. I went to a boys' school——"

"Haiyah!" interjected the maid.

"And afterwards I joined my husband and this gentleman, Mr Wei, in a reading party."

"Didn't they discover your secret?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's odd," said the maid. "But will you tell us something about this Mr Wei?"

Upon this, Jasmine launched out in a glowing eulogy upon her friend. She expatiated with fervour on his youth, good looks, learning, and prospects, and with such effect did she speak, that Miss King,

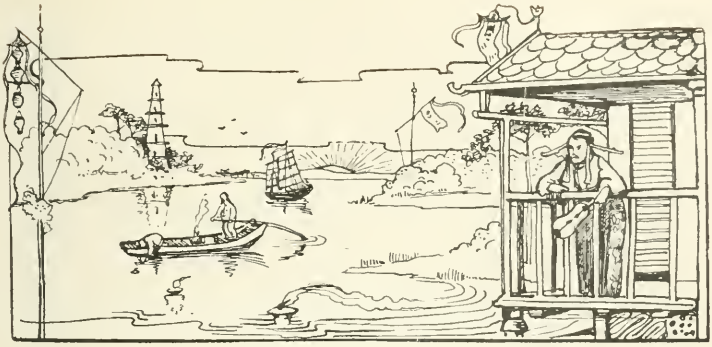
who began to take in the situation, ended by accepting cordially Jasmine's proposal.

"And now, lady, you must stay and dine with me," said Miss King, when the bargain was struck, "while my cousin entertains your husband in the hall."

At this meal the beginning of a friendship was formed between the two ladies which lasted ever afterwards, though it was somewhat unevenly balanced. Jasmine's stronger nature felt compassion mingled with liking for the pretty doll-like Miss King, while that young lady entertained the profoundest admiration for her guest.

There was nothing to delay the fulfilment of the engagement thus happily arranged, and at the next full moon Miss King had an opportunity of comparing her bridegroom with the picture which Jasmine had drawn of him.

Scholars are plentiful in China, but it was plainly impossible that men of such distinguished learning as Tu and Wei should be left among the unemployed, and almost immediately after their marriage they were appointed to important posts in the empire. Tu rose rapidly to the highest rank, and died, at a good old age, Viceroy of the Metropolitan Province and senior guardian to the heir-apparent. Wei was not so supremely fortunate, but then, as Tu used to say, "he had not a Jasmine to help him."



LOVE AND ALCHEMY.

IT was a lovely autumn evening, when a young man, dressed in the height of fashion, sat in the verandah of one of the villas which dot the bank of the beautiful western Lake of Hangchow, gazing at the exquisite landscape which lay before him. The sun had just sunk below the mountains on the western shore of the lake, and its lingering rays were still touching with gold the hill-tops and the highest branches of the tallest trees. At the moment of the disappearance of the sun a cool breeze had sprung up, bringing refreshment and renewed vigour on its wing. Mr Pan, for that was the young man's name, was looking with admiration on the scene before him. He was one of those men who are easily affected by the sight of the beautiful, and in his wonderment at the exquisite mixture of

colouring thrown over the lake and the islands which diversified its surface, he rose from his seat and bent forward over the railing of the balcony with an eager attitude, which was in entire disregard of the Confucian directions as to the positions proper to the person of a "superior man."

It was plain, from the deep lines which marked Pan's youthful features, that this was not by any means the first time that nature had mastered the rules of propriety, and it was obvious that the workings of his mind had not infrequently produced excitement such as was fatal to the calm engendered by rites and ceremonies. And such, indeed, was the case. His excitable imagination had at an early age seduced him from the eminently correct, though rather prosy, literature of the Confucian school, and had led him into the wild rhapsodical writings of the early Taoist prophets. From their fascinating pages he learned the oneness of matter, that life and death were the same things under varying conditions, and that as it was within the power of man to perpetuate the joys of life by use of elixirs from the isles of the blest, so it was also possible for him to transmute the commonest metals into their most precious shapes by the application of the philosopher's stone.

Being rich and enthusiastic, he had devoted himself with the keenest relish to discover the secrets by which the high priests of the Taoist faith had been able to convert the merest dross into gold and silver. After the most approved models of antiquity, he built a laboratory in the garden of his house at Sungkiang, and furnished it with the furnaces,

crucibles, and other paraphernalia necessary for the accomplishment of his great task. Sums of money, which, if devoted to any other purpose, he would have considered extravagant, he expended without question on the ingredients which composed the mysterious *tan* by which he was to be made the richest of the rich. Repeated failures had in no way damped his ardour; for was it not a fact, that on each occasion he had been on the point of success, when some unforeseen accident had just snatched the prize from his grasp? It was after one such misfortune when, at the moment when the mass of metal in the crucible was assuming the yellow tinge which marked its conversion to the precious metal, a demon of misfortune in the shape of a fox had looked in at the door, which by some accident had blown open, and the subtle metal, influenced by the presence of the ill-omened creature, had turned black in an instant, as though it had been blasted.

In proportion to his hopes, which had on that occasion been raised higher than ever, Pan's disappointment now was bitter; and so completely upset was he by his constant watching, and by his blighted expectations, that his friends advised him to seek rest and refreshment in change of scene and surroundings. It was in obedience to these recommendations that he betook himself to the villa on the Western Lake, where we now find him. With rapt admiration on the evening in question, which was about a week after his arrival, he gazed on the beauties before him until, to his imagination, the features of the landscape assumed the aspect of the fabled islands of the

blest, and he fell to wondering what manner of persons were the houri and genii of the place. While thus lost in the pleasures of imagination, his attention was drawn to a sumptuously-fitted-up yacht, which was brought from a neighbouring boat-house to the landing-place at the adjoining villa, which on that day had received its tenants. So entirely was the appearance of the vessel in keeping with his fanciful dreams, that its actuality in no way disturbed the tenor of his thoughts, and when, presently, a handsome, gaily-dressed man led a lady of exquisite beauty on to the yacht, followed by a number of servants and singing-girls, the illusion was complete.

So fascinated was Pan by the beauty of the lady, that he was lost to a perception of all other surrounding objects. Intently he watched the yacht as it sailed out into the lake, and as the sound of minstrelsy was wafted over the waters from her deck, he longed for that spiritual elixir which had enabled some of the greatest of alchemists to annihilate space and form, and which might enable him to bask even spiritually in the presence of such ineffable loveliness. Absorbed in his thoughts he remained motionless, until, hours afterwards, the vessel was borne again lightly over the waves to the landing-place, when merry thrills of joyous laughter, testifying to the enjoyment which the voyagers had experienced on their cruise, delighted his ears.

The shades of night prevented Pan from seeing more than dimly the figures of the pleasure-seekers; but he recognised the object of his admiration, and only withdrew from the verandah when the door of

the villa closed upon her. Restless and excited, he wandered round the home of the lady, and in the morning he sauntered along the shores of the lake in the vague hope that he might have an opportunity

"A handsome, gaily-dressed man led a lady of exquisite beauty on to the yacht."

of making the acquaintance of the happy possessor of so priceless a jewel. Once he flattered himself that he saw the lady herself at an upper window, and he drew near to make a closer inspection. But

great was his disappointment when he found that the form which had attracted him was that of a singularly ill-favoured old woman, who was engaged in washing clothes, and who very nearly drenched him to the skin by throwing the contents of her basin over the wall close to the spot where he stood. Disheartened, but not in despair, he turned for another stroll by the lake. By a turn of her wheel Fortune now befriended him. For, on his return towards his villa, he saw his happy neighbour sauntering towards him, and talking as he walked to a beautifully sleek pet mocking-bird, which he carried perched on a crooked stick of ivory, to which one leg of the bird was fastened by a golden thread. As the two men approached each other the stranger looked up from his bird with an engaging smile towards Pan, who, encouraged by his friendly attitude, made him a deep obeisance. The stranger appeared pleased by this advance, and, having bowed in return with all ceremony, asked Pan what his "honourable surname" and "exalted personal name" might be. Pan replied that his "despicable surname" was Pan, and that his "mean personal name" was Kientsêng. By a similar process he learned that his new friend's name was Le Kwaitso. The two men now entered into conversation, in the course of which Pan was made aware that Le came from Chungchow, and that he was paying a visit to the beautiful Western Lake for rest and enjoyment.

"It seems difficult to suppose," said Pan, "that my honourable elder brother can be in need of rest, seeing that he has constantly about him in

abundance all that can make life enviable and enjoyable."

"It is true," replied Le, "that I now have wealth at my command, and wealth into which I can dip at will without diminishing it. But it has not always been so, and it is only after much study and many disappointments that I have reached my present position of complete independence."

Pan had not intended his remark to refer only to

"The stranger looked up from his bird with an engaging smile."

Le's wealth, and he was at first shocked that his friend should so undervalue his beautiful wife, for so she turned out to be, as not to mention her among the blessings he enjoyed. But Le's reference to a wealth which could be used at will without diminishing the store directed his thoughts into another and quite an unexpected direction.

"My elder brother talks in riddles," said Pan, hur-

riedly, and with a most un-Confucian agitation; "how can wealth be expended and not diminished except by the art which filled the coffers of Heu Chenchun."[1]

Le smiled, and said, "Perhaps you are right."

"If that be so," replied Pan, "I beseech you to divulge to your younger brother this great secret. For years I have toiled in pursuit of this object, and though sometimes I have nearly gained it, the prize has by some misfortune been invariably snatched from my hand."

"It is not a matter to be lightly divulged," said Le. "If I could really believe——; but no, what reason have I to suppose that you are a fit recipient of the hidden mystery? But come and dine with me this evening on my yacht, and we will talk further on these matters."

Pan gratefully accepted the invitation, and the two men parted. Once Pan turned round to look after the alchemist, and watched his retreating figure, resplendent with the choicest silks and satins, and possessing all the grace and dignity of a scholar, as, with sauntering steps, he chirrupped to his bird, which fluttered in response to the length of his golden cord.

Punctual to a moment, Pan went to Le's landing-stage. As he had sat over a bottle of wine in the early part of the afternoon he had wondered for the first time whether by any chance the lovely Mrs Le would accompany her husband on that evening's cruise. Her presence, he had felt, would add a new

[1] A celebrated alchemist of the third century who had learned the secret of converting base metals into gold.

delight to the explanation which he hoped was forthcoming. This, he knew, would not be in accordance with the rules of strict propriety, but then, he thought to himself, may not a man possessing such a secret be above all conventionalities.

However, when the time came Mrs Le was not present. In other respects the dinner was all that could be desired. The viands were excellent; the wine was of the choicest kinds; the music which accompanied the feast was bright and joyous; and Le's conversation, which never flagged, was marked by scholarly knowledge and brilliancy of diction. At the conclusion of the repast, which lasted an inordinate time, the two diners, satiated with the good things on the table, threw themselves back on the divan and lazily smoked the pipes which were carried to their lips and lighted by two very pretty attendant maidens, whose names, as Pan afterwards discovered, were "Autumn Moon" and "Springday Cloud."

After smoking for a few minutes in silence, Pan said: "May I ask you, sir, to continue to your lowly pupil your instructions of this morning?"

"I have been thinking over our conversation," said Le; "and, believing you to be a genuine inquirer, I have made up my mind to admit you into the mystical body of the initiated." At these words Pan raised himself on his elbow, and leaned eagerly towards the alchemist. "I have learned," continued Le, "the secret of the nine transmutations which, by the virtue of *tan*, convert lead and mercury into gold and silver. And since I am of opinion that every holder of so vast a secret should ensure it against

being lost by imparting it to a pupil, I am willing to make known to you the materials of the mystic *tan*, and the method by which it is to be used. But this only on one condition, and that is, that you give me your word of honour that you never will, directly or indirectly, tell the secret to a soul, except in after-years to the one pupil whom you shall choose as your scientific heir."

"I promise with my whole heart," said Pan, enthusiastically.

"That is well," said the alchemist. "And now, when are we to set to work? I would invite you to visit me at Chungchow, where I live, but the distance is so great that I hesitate to do so."

"But will not my benevolent elder brother honour my humble cottage with his presence? I have there all that is necessary for our work except the knowledge, which you, O my master, would supply."

"I should be delighted to visit your honourable palace; but were I to, I should not know what to do with my wife, as I should not like her to travel home alone, and I cannot leave her in a strange place like this."

"Though a bachelor," said Pan, "my humble dwelling is a large one, and if the honourable lady would condescend to enter my door I would set apart a compound for her residence."

With considerable reluctance, which kept Pan in a torture of suspense, the alchemist assented to this arrangement, and when the two friends parted at the wharf, the day was arranged for their departure for Sungkiang.

To describe the joy which filled Pan's heart at the double prospect before him of learning the great mystery, and of entertaining the lovely Mrs Le, would be quite impossible. With early dawn he sent a trusted servant to Sungkiang to see that everything was put in order for the reception of his guests, and at the same time he wrote a note on red

"Both guest and host were in excellent spirits."

paper inviting the alchemist to a sail on the lake in a yacht which he hired for the occasion. The invitation was accepted, and the expedition proved eminently successful. Both guest and host were in excellent spirits, and in the interval between the small repasts of wine and tea, which diversified the day, the conversation turned, always on Pan's initia-

tive, on the burning question of the transmutation of metals. "And now," he said, on one such occasion, "to come to the practical point of ways and means. What shall you require for the operation?"

"First of all," replied the alchemist, "it is necessary to have certain quantities of pure gold and silver, which form, as we call them, the mothers of the gold and silver, because they give birth to and nourish the product which is obtained. The mother-metals must be carefully purified before they are put in the crucible. They must then be submitted to nine fusions, during which must be added to them chemicals known as 'yellow germs' and 'coagulated snow.' When the moment arrives for opening the crucible, a small quantity of the mystic *tan* powder must be thrown in, when the masses of metal become transmuted at once into the finest gold and silver."

"How much of the mother-metals do you require?"

"That depends on the amount of gold and silver you wish to obtain. The greater the quantity of mother-metal, the more powerful is the action of the *tan*. Thus, if any one were to put into the crucible a considerable weight of gold, he might become possessed of riches before which the wealth of the State would appear as nothing."

"My resources are moderate," said Pan, "but I can scrape together several millions of taels,[1] which I will place at your disposal."

Pan was too absorbed in the prospect of the wealth before him to notice a queer twinkle in the alchemist's eye at the mention of the sum available, and he heard

[1] A tael is worth about 5s. 6d.

only the somewhat condescending tone of his voice as he said—

"As to the amount, that is your affair, not mine."

On the following day, the two friends started by boat for Sungkiang. Pan and Le occupied a yacht hired by the former, and the lovely Mrs Le travelled in the gorgeously-appointed vessel which belonged to her husband.

During the last day or two, Pan had been so entirely absorbed in the idea of the boundless wealth which was now within his reach, that his mind had only reverted to Mrs Le at such times as, with pipe in mouth and a flask of the famous Suchow wine at his elbow, he took his ease after his mid-day and evening meals. But now that, though not in the same boat, they were near neighbours, the thought of her exquisite beauty more frequently occurred to him, more especially as every now and then, when the yachts came abreast, he caught glimpses of her almond-shaped eyes and arched eyebrows, and it caused him infinite pleasure to notice that, far from appearing to avoid his eye, she rather encouraged his gaze, and even cast furtive glances in reply to his obvious but unexpressed admiration. As a poet of the Han Dynasty sings—

> "Across the flood quick glances pass as token
> That love is there though not a word be spoken."

After a voyage of two days the travellers arrived at Sungkiang, and Pan invited Le to inspect his town house, which stood close to the wharf. In reply to Le's look of disappointment at the situation of the

house in so busy a thoroughfare, and surrounded on all sides by other houses, Pan hastened to say, "This is not the place for our great work. Beyond the western suburbs stands my villa, enwalled and closely fenced about with lofty trees. There, undisturbed by human eye or noise, we may disclose the secret power of *tan*, and make a captive of the god of wealth."

So saying, the two men returned to their yachts, and, following the course of the grand canal, soon reached the wharf, which abutted on the western suburbs. With some pleasure Pan led Le into the spacious grounds of his favourite residence, and indeed they were such as to justify his pride. A long avenue of handsome trees led from the portal into a park where, through vistas of flowering plants and dwarfed shrubs, were seen pointed kiosques and decorated pavilions, which added colour and brilliancy to the views by the painted tiles which adorned their upturned roofs. The principal building contained apartments without number, some of which were so concealed that they might readily have escaped the observation of a visitor, while the pavilions scattered over the park offered charming retreats, and were so placed as to refresh the eye by views from their windows of picturesque rockwork, high bridges and artificial grottos.

Le gazed around him with admiration.

"Admirable!" he cried, "admirable! This is exactly the place for our work. The calm of solitude such as this place affords is precisely what we want. Here we cannot fail to be successful, and my wife may stay here with all the privacy and safety which are ordained

for married ladies by the Book of Rites, and which I would desire for her. Pray, send for her at once. But it is necessary that I should remind you that each of the nine mutations occupies nine days, so that if we are to complete our work, we shall be obliged to remain the unworthy guests of my benevolent elder brother for three moons."

"The lady presently appeared."

The thought of having Mrs Le as a neighbour for so long gave Pan a thrill of pleasure, which added emphasis to his declaration that if it were three years it would be too short a time. In response to the message sent to her yacht, the lady presently appeared, attended by "Autumn Moon" and "Springday Cloud." She was tastefully dressed, and her dainty walk and willow-like waist added grace to her beauty. As she approached the two friends, Pan would have

withdrawn in accordance with the rules of propriety. But the alchemist stopped him.

"We now form," said he, "one family. Suffer my unworthy wife to salute you, and let there be no restraint between us."

For the first time Pan had now an opportunity of making a close inspection of the lady's features, and the sight was almost too much for him. As he afterwards said, "her beauty eclipsed that of the moon, and was enough to make the flowers jealous." For the moment all thought of his approaching alchemistic triumphs disappeared, and his heart melted in him as snow at the touch of a flame. So soon as he could recover himself he said—

"The pavilions in the gardens are all ready for your reception. Will it please you to make your choice of the one you may like to occupy?"

While the lady made her inspection, Pan selected from among his family heirlooms a pair of gold bracelets and a pair of earrings, and bringing them to Le, presented them to him, saying, "Allow me to offer these trifles to your noble wife. Such an offering is authorised by the Book of Rites, and I trust that she will not disdain my humble homage."

"Your generosity is overwhelming; but while such things as these are of value to you, they are none to us, who can coin them at pleasure; so take them back, for to accept them would be to abuse your hospitality."

"I had hoped that you would have seen in this insignificant present a token of the sincerity of my friendship," replied Pan. "Though in them-

selves worthless, I pray you to regard only my intentions."

At these words the alchemist's countenance relaxed. "Your words," said he, "have overcome all my objections. I accept with pleasure these signs of your kindness." So saying, he handed the trinkets to a servant, with directions to take them to the lady, and to invite her to come in person to thank their host. Again Pan had the infinite pleasure of meeting her face to face, but so overcome was he with her beauty that words failed him, and he did nothing but bow and gaze in return for her courtly inclinations and gracious words of thanks.

On the next morning the two friends entered seriously upon their work. Having carefully examined the laboratory, the furnaces, and the surroundings, to see that they were perfectly free from all trace of impurity of every kind ("For know," said Le, "that the existence in the atmosphere of the laboratory of any material or moral impurity is fatal to the transmutation of the metal"), he pronounced himself satisfied. He then retired, and presently returned, dressed with infinite care in new robes of brilliant blue, encircled round the waist by a broad red sash.

Meanwhile, Pan had seen to the lighting of the furnace, and had made ready the mother-metal, which was to produce the priceless offspring. When all was in order Le, with much solemnity, approached the crucible, and with certain cabalistic utterances, dropped the metal, accompanied by a due proportion of "yellow germs," into the pot, and fastened close

the lid. Day after day, with unremitting care, the two friends kept alight the fire, which was to burn without intermission until the completion of the transmutation, and were so engaged on the twentieth day of the process, when a messenger, dusty and travel-stained, arrived, bearing a letter for the alchemist. As Le read the contents, the colour left his cheeks, and Pan saw a man, to whom the most subtle secrets of nature had been revealed, reduced almost to tears.

"I hope your messenger is not one of ill tidings," said Pan.

"Indeed he is," replied the alchemist, in a broken voice. "I regret to say that my aged mother is dangerously ill, and that I must at once go to her bedside."

"I am extremely sorry to hear it," answered Pan, "and though I fear that your absence will put an end to our present experiment, I trust that you will be able to return at some subsequent time to complete the work."

"It is my earnest desire to carry out our undertaking. But what can I do? I must go to my mother's dwelling, and my wife, who might have filled my place, having been accustomed to watch the furnace at home with me, is too young to be left in the house of even such a friend as you are."

"Do we not, to quote your own words, now form one family," said Pan, "and cannot you trust to my honour? Have I not studied the writings of Confucius, and do I not know the rules of propriety by

heart? Let my elder brother leave his wife here, and her honour shall be my first care."

Long the alchemist hesitated, but at last he yielded.

"I have," he said, "complete confidence in you, and as evidemce of it I accept your proposal. But I must go to prepare for my departure, and to give full instructions to my wife."

"All is saved," muttered Pan, in a voice suffocated with emotion, as Le went in the direction of the lady's apartments.

After an interval, which seemed to Pan to be interminable, the alchemist came to take leave of his host.

"A thousand times ten thousand times," said he, "I commend my wife to you. Be very careful, and do not for a moment neglect the furnace. Remember the least fault of omission or of commission may work irrevocable evil."

With a feeling of inexpressible joy, Pan saw the alchemist ride off rapidly from his door, and as he turned into the garden his imagination pictured the infinite delights of the *tête-à-tête* interviews with his lovely guest, which were now possible. Nor had he long to wait for one such, for on the very next morning "Autumn Moon" presented herself at his study door, and invited him to accompany her mistress to the laboratory. Overjoyed at the proposal, Pan escorted the lady to the hallowed spot, the arrangements of which he found it necessary to explain to her very fully indeed. Nor, as Pan fancied, was there any desire on the lady's part to

cut short the lengthy descriptions and minute details in which he indulged. On the next day there were more matters to talk over, and in the momentary absence of "Springday Cloud," who had gone to fetch her mistress's fan, the lady gave him one of those dangerous glances which had electrified him on former occasions. By degrees the attendance of "Autumn Moon" and "Springday Cloud" became less inevitable, and Pan enjoyed the exquisite pleasure of unrestrained converse with the beautiful enchantress. By-and-by she became confidential.

"You doubtless think," she said on one occasion, "that I live a life of careless joy. But my husband is very different at home to what he is abroad."

"Is he unkind to you?"

"Not exactly unkind, but he is very harsh."

"Is it possible that he does not love you?"

"He does in a kind of way," sighed Mrs Le, "but his love is the cold love of an unsympathetic nature, and," she added in a faltering voice, "it is that which is so painful to me. I am one of those to whom love is second nature, and I long—oh, how I long!—for a congenial intercourse with a true and affectionate soul."

"I am true and I am affectionate," said Pan, trembling with excitement, "and I love you with all my heart. Let me devote my life and being to you." With these burning words the man who knew the rules of propriety by heart, so far forgot himself as to clasp the blushing lady round the waist.

With a scream she shook herself free. "Are you

mad?" said she. "Don't you know that the least taint in the magic atmosphere of the laboratory is fatal to the success of the work?"

"What care I for the work?" said Pan. "It is you I——"

At this inopportune moment "Autumn Cloud" rushed in to say that the alchemist had suddenly returned. The announcement was hardly made when

"'*Why, what has happened?*' *he exclaimed.*"

the unwelcome intruder entered. After exchanging cordial greetings with Pan and his wife, the alchemist turned gaily towards the furnace, saying, "Now let us see how the ingredients are working. Why, what has happened?" he exclaimed, with a look of blanched horror, as he examined the contents of the crucible. "The metals are curdled. Some wrong has been

committed. Some evil influence has found its way into the laboratory."

With a searching look the alchemist turned his gaze on Pan and on his wife. At first Pan attempted to return his stare, but his evil conscience made a coward of him, and he trembled from head to foot. As to the lady, she fairly burst into tears, and hurried out of the laboratory as fast as her feet, three inches long, could carry her. The fury depicted on Le's face was terrible to behold. He seized Pan by the throat.

"You perjured villain," he screamed, "this is your honour! This is the care you have taken of my wife. Prepare for death, for by Amito Fuh you shall visit the yellow springs (Hades) before sunset."

Fairly paralysed with terror, which he afterwards constantly affirmed was on account of the lady, Pan begged for mercy.

"Oh, spare our lives, for pity sake," said he, "and anything you demand shall be yours!"

"You miserable creature! do you think that money can satisfy my wounded honour?" screamed Le. "No; you shall die, and my apostate wife with you."

At this juncture Le's valet threw himself at his master's feet. "Lofty sir," he cried, "before you carry out your fell decree, hear, oh hear the evidence which I have gathered from the servants! Upon my honour, this is the first time Mr Pan and Mrs Le have been alone together. And though the evidence of the crucible is enough to warrant your inflicting death upon them, yet remember their youth, and oh! remember the situation."

"What do you mean?" said Le, in slightly modified tones. "Would you have me let the villain go unpunished?"

"By no means," pleaded the valet; "his god is his wealth. Tear a portion of that god from him, and in so doing you will inflict a punishment on him to which the loss of life will be as nothing."

"There is something in what you say," said Le, in still milder accents. "But I have no taste for such bargainings. Let him send me an offer which I can accept within a quarter of an hour, or he dies."

In less than the required time, Pan sent his outraged guest a packet containing ten thousand taels of silver (£3,000), which sum Le's valet afterwards assured Pan he had had much difficulty in inducing his master to accept in condonation of the wrong done to him through the flagrant breach of etiquette of which Pan had been guilty. Accept it he did, however, and in less than an hour the indignant alchemist had shaken the dust of Pan's dwelling from his feet, taking with him his wife, Pan's packet of silver, and, presumably, the mother-metal, for no trace of it was ever afterwards found.

Scarcely, however, had he left the town when the magistrate called on Pan to inquire into the whereabouts of his departed guest, who was much "wanted" for a series of alchemistic frauds, "to the success of which," added the magistrate, "he has, I understand, been largely indebted to his extremely beautiful and fascinating wife, and a very astute valet."

A CHINESE BALLAD.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL.

A MAID was sitting in her boudoir snug,
Stitching away;
On coloured shoes embroidering blossoms bright,
When lo! a fortune-teller met her sight
Passing that way. [*She calls to him.*]

The master stopped, right glad to hear her call,
"Come here!"
"Advance, most learned man," she gently said,
"And deign to converse with this lonely maid,
O honoured sir."

Handing the sage a wooden bench she said,
"You're welcome, sir.
You here will rest awhile, so let me hope,
While I impart to you my horoscope,
O honoured sir.

'Twas in the fourth month that I first saw light;
Then high up there
[*pointing to the skies*]
The pretty hare [1] was gambolling in the moon,
And peach and plum trees were about to bloom,
O honoured sir.

In that same month, the thirteenth day thereof,
My mother dear
To me, the humble maid you see, gave birth
When from the East the sun first touched the earth,
O honoured sir.

I ask not riches, at such paltry stuff
I do but sneer;
Nor for high honours do I greatly care,
I only crave the festive marriage-chair,
O honoured sir."

The master took his pen and quickly wrote
With learned air;
And having reckoned, said in voice sedate,
"You have another three years yet to wait,
My maiden fair."

The hapless maiden, when she listening heard
This sentence drear,
Grew angry, and with countenance irate,
Said, "You know nothing of the books of Fate,
O honoured sir!

[1] The hare is the sign of the fourth month, and is popularly believed to derive its origin from the vital essence of the moon, in which luminary a sublimated figure of the animal is visible to the Chinese fancy.

Across the street there lives a lady fair,
Born King by name;
Her father's third child she, and strange to say,
Her birth with mine is both to month and day
The very same.

Yet she when fifteen years of age embraced
A son and heir;
And the next year to this most welcome joy
She added still another little boy,
O honoured sir.

Then take these copper cash and go thy way,
Nor linger here;
And never darken more my humble gate.
You are not fit to read the books of Fate,
O honoured sir."

THE LOVE-SICK MAIDEN.

A CHINESE POEM.

WITHIN a silken curtained bed there lay
A maiden wondrous fair but vaguely ill,
Who cared for nothing in the outside world,
Contented only to lie lone and still.

While lying thus her neighbour Mrs Wang
Stepped lightly o'er to ask her how she fared;
And drawing back the curtains, stood aghast
To see how wan and pale her cheeks appeared.

"Tell me what ails you, dear," she kindly said.
"My mind's diseased," the maiden soft replied:
"I cannot sleep, I loathe the sight of food,
And I'm so weary." Then she turned and sighed.

"Shall I a doctor call to see you, dear?"
"A doctor? No; I don't want any such.
They countless questions ask to earn their fees,
And sometimes end by finding out too much."

"Shall I call in a priest to pray with you?"
"A priest? Oh no, that would be worse again.
His snuffling chants and dismal tinkling bells
Would rather aggravate than ease my pain."

"Shall I go seek a nurse to wait on you?"
"A nurse? Oh no," the pretty maiden said;
"I could not bear to have her watching me,
And purring like a cat about my bed."

"But what's the cause of this distemper, dear?"
The maiden raised herself and blushing said:
"Last spring young Le, who to the wars has gone,
Was wont to saunter over hill and glade.

He loved to wander forth amongst the flowers,
To revel in the beauties of the spring,
To watch the blossoms opening to the sun,
And hear the lark and tuneful throstle sing."

"But what has that to do with you, my child?"
"Oh blind, oh blind, and can't you really see?
I love him as the wakening dawn loves light;
And let me whisper to you, he loves me."

"Then shall I call this Mr Le to you?"
"What use to call, he's many leagues away.
Oh, if I could but see him once again!"
"You shall, my child, for he comes home to-day."

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